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Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order

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Thank you very much Professor de Zayas.

First of all, I wish to thank you for the invitation to participate in this important consultation on obstacles to effective participation at the international and national levels and possible measures to overcome them. I appreciate the opportunity to speak about the proposal of a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly and the international campaign that advocates the establishment of such an assembly.

In his publication, “An Agenda for Democratization,” then UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali who has been one of the key supporters of our campaign, pointed out that “If democratization is the most reliable way to legitimize and improve national governance, it is also the most reliable way to legitimize and improve international organization.” He went on to stress that democratization at the international level means to make the UN “more open and responsive by increasing participation” and that it has to be based on and aim to “promote the dignity and worth of the individual human being and the fundamental equality of all persons and of all peoples.”¹

With very few exceptions, like the ILO, the UN and the various organizations and entities of the UN system by definition are state-based and intergovernmental in nature. States, represented by their governments, are the main subjects and creators of international law. The challenge is to find ways to create a space within this setup that nonetheless allows connecting global decision-making more directly with the world’s citizens as individuals. As professor de Zayas already stressed in his report to the General Assembly’s Third Committee, the intention has to be to identify realistic and pragmatic steps.

The campaign for a UN Parliamentary Assembly is based on an international appeal that, since 2007, has been endorsed by more than 1,000 members of parliament and numerous other distinguished personalities from all walks of life and over 100 countries. According to this document, the fundamental purpose of the assembly is to give the world’s citizens a voice at the UN through more direct representation. The underlying idea is increased participation through increased political representation. It would be the first UN body mandated to represent the world’s citizens as such. Delegates would be accountable to their constituents, or voters, if you like, and not to their governments.

We envisage a UN Parliamentary Assembly to be a dynamic process that would begin in a modest way and over time could develop further. Initially, for example, it could be composed of members delegated by national parliaments, thereby reflecting existing political groups as best as possible, at least the governing majority and the official opposition. At a later stage, countries might choose to have their UNPA delegates be directly elected. Similarly, rights and functions at the beginning could be merely consultative in nature and only be expanded step by step in later stages. The distribution of seats could take population size into account, thus emphasizing the principle of democratic representation of people. The delegates should organize not according to national origin but in transnational political groups.

Article 22 of the UN's Charter allows the UN General Assembly to set up subsidiary bodies. Based on this mechanism, the UNGA could bring a consultative UN Parliamentary Assembly into being by a simple vote. An amendment of the UN's Charter would not be required.

One of the great merits of the proposal to establish a UN Parliamentary Assembly is that it is possible to draw upon a large body of experience with similar institutions that have been in existence at the level of regional and supra-regional intergovernmental organizations. There are more than 30 such institutions today, like the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the OSCE-PA, the Latin-American Parliament, or the Pan-African Parliament. At the regional level, the advantage of including parliamentary organs into intergovernmental organizations thus is widely recognized. It is a logical step to do so at the global level, at the United Nations.

Since the proposal was first made in 1949, scores of individual experts and politicians, institutions, and meetings have expressed support for a UNPA. The European Parliament in 1994 was the first parliamentary body to do so. As we are meeting in Switzerland today, I do not want to miss mentioning an initiative of a majority of 108 members of the Swiss Parliament who in 2005 called on then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to introduce the proposal into the official reform debate at the UN. Subsequently, the Swiss government expressed its openness. As a campaign it is one of our goals to identify and bring together more such sympathetic governments.

Finally, let me stress that this is a particularly good moment for this consultation and for developing recommendations on strengthening participation at the international level. There is broad discussion of the post-2015 Development Goals going on. We do not at this stage know what will be the form and content of the post-2015 development agenda. Yet it is already clear that international organizations, states, and large segments of civil society will remain focused on that agenda. It would not be unusual for other United Nations reform measures to be contemplated in the context of the post-2015 discussions. We recall that the last major UN reform exercise was occasioned in 2005 at the five-year mark of the MDG process.

Serious consideration should be given to the contribution that a parliamentary assembly at the United Nations could make to the mechanisms which can assure accountability, reporting, monitoring and continued dialogue regarding the fulfillment of the post-2015 goals.

The IPU is promoting that democratic governance should be integrated into a new global development framework. The question of democratic governance should not be limited to the national level, however. In fact, global civil society does already recommend that the post-2015 framework should “incorporate targets on the reform and democratization of global institutions.” This was one of the points resulting from a series of international deliberations of civil society conducted under the auspices of Beyond 2015 and the Global Call to Action Against Poverty.² The establishment of a UN Parliamentary Assembly should be a key element in this and one of its innovations could be to provide civil society groups strong means of participation as well.

In his first report to the Human Rights Council, professor de Zayas said that “the emergence of a democratic international order would be advanced by the participation of a growing number of States which implement democratic principles domestically.”³ It should be considered in this connection that the creation of a parliamentary assembly at the UN would also reinforce the trend toward democratic governance nationally, especially with regard to countries in transition. There are a number of ways a UNPA would also contribute to the democratization of governance nationally, but to name just one point, the experience of being in such a parliamentary assembly would reinforce the importance of democratic practice, a message that would not be lost when UNPA delegates returned to national capitals.

Thank you.

¹ Boutros-Ghali, Boutros. Supplement to reports on democratization. Report to the 51st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 20. Dezember 1996. Para. 66.

² Beyond 2015. „National Deliberations: A Synthesis Report“, März 2013.
<http://www.beyond2015.org/news/national-deliberations-synthesis-report>.

³ A/HRC/21/45, page 15, para 41