



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Chemin du Pommier 5  
Case postale 330  
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex  
Geneva – Switzerland  
www.ipu.org

## Parliamentarians at Risk Around the World

**Briefing organised by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
and the Inter-Parliamentary Union  
co-hosted by the House Democracy Partnership**

Capitol Building (room H-313), Thursday, September 19, 2019  
10:30-11:30 a.m.

**Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron, IPU President and member, Congress of the Union,  
Mexico**

Ladies and gentlemen,

The stories that you have just heard clearly illustrate the extent to which opposition parliamentarians in Venezuela, Turkey and the Philippines face reprisals for merely doing their work. However, the risks for parliamentarians are not limited to these three countries. Last year alone, the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians dealt with a total of 564 cases of parliamentarians from 43 countries. This is a sharp increase from previous years. In fact, since 2014, the number of cases of violations against parliamentarians across the globe has practically doubled.

This record is yet another alarming sign that, in the face of increased authoritarianism, those who speak out against abuse are increasingly themselves the victims of human rights. As many would be inclined to think, not only journalists and civil society representatives are in the line of fire. Parliamentarians too, by relying on free speech to represent citizens and hold those in power to account, are increasingly becoming the target of human rights violations.

It is crucial that we join hands to protect those parliamentarians, which is why the IPU attaches such great importance to the principle of parliamentary solidarity. Many of the cases before the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians are put, in the form of draft decisions, to the full IPU membership for subsequent action. Once adopted by the IPU membership, these decisions often include a denunciation of the human rights situation in a given case. This is extremely valuable in and of itself as it constitutes a clear and public statement of concern by the international parliamentary community and offers consolation to the victims. However, the IPU decisions on individual human rights cases go well beyond that. They also include a call for action by all IPU Member Parliaments to help bring about a satisfactory solution that respects human rights. And increasingly, we are seeing that Parliaments are using their powers, large and small, to help colleagues in need across the world. They raise the IPU concerns during bilateral visits, routinely disseminate and discuss the Committee's decisions inside and outside parliament and raise public attention to the situation of parliamentarians at risk.

The “Defending Freedoms Project”, which the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission co-founded, is a shining example of parliamentary solidarity with those who are detained for the peaceful expression of their beliefs. I see many parallels between the work of the “Defending Freedoms Project” and the work of our Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, which both rely on parliamentary action to protect those courageous individuals suffering abuse for wanting to bring about positive

change in their societies. I therefore hope that this meeting today can also be the starting-point for reflection on how the IPU's Committee can be associated with the Defending Freedoms Project, for instance by systematically providing information on cases of parliamentarians who would qualify as "prisoners of conscience".

I am suggesting this too because only by working together will we be able to increase the success of our actions. Because let's face it, when human rights are at stake, concrete results are crucial as lives often depend on it. I am proud to tell you in this regard that the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, with the help of others, has built a solid record over the years of protecting and offering redress to parliamentarians. To name but some examples: the release from prison last year of Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, which enabled him to return to parliamentary life. This outcome followed years of lobbying by the IPU for his release. In fact, the IPU was the only organization that systematically sent observers to report on the fairness of his trial and that publicly denounced flaws in the proceedings whenever they occurred. To stay in Malaysia: charges under the Peaceful Assembly Act against 15 other Malaysian opposition MPs were dismissed. Here is another telling example: last year, following an IPU mission, six Maldivian MPs who were in detention on allegedly politically motivated charges were released. In Iraq, MP Al-Dainy, who had investigated conditions of detention in his country, was prosecuted and sentenced to death following a flawed trial. After the IPU intervened, he was able to return to Iraq from exile to face a retrial that led to his acquittal and release.

As the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I would not be doing my work properly if I would not end my remarks by mentioning that we are keen to engage with the US Congress, a founding member of the IPU in 1889 but a member that officially left in 2002. We have been working with various Members of Congress over the years on specific issues and there have been several attempts in Congress to introduce a bill to have it re-affiliate with the IPU.

We truly believe that not having the US Congress in the IPU is a missed opportunity for both sides. This year the IPU celebrates its 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary. What began in 1889 as a small group of parliamentarians, dedicated to promoting peace through parliamentary diplomacy and dialogue, has since grown into the global organization of national parliaments, which now has 179 members.

In today's world in which democracy, human rights and the rule of law are increasingly under strain and in which so many of our challenges are global in nature, the participation of the US Congress could make a critical difference in shaping collective parliamentary action. I therefore hope that I count on your support to facilitate a speedy return of the US Congress to the IPU.

Thank you.