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UN Forum on Minorities Geneva, 11 November 2009

Obstacles to effective political participation faced by minorities *Remarks by Mr. Anders B. Johnsson, IPU Secretary General*

Good morning,

I welcome this opportunity to speak on the subject of effective political participation of minorities and I thank the Independent Expert on Minorities for her initiative in organizing this Forum. As the Secretary General of the international organization of parliaments, I will focus my remarks on the participation of minorities in parliament.

I will address two aspects of effective participation – gaining access to parliament, and influencing the work of parliament as a member. My remarks are based on interviews with parliamentarians from minority and majority communities which the IPU is carrying out as part of a joint project with the UNDP on inclusive parliaments.

While every parliament has a unique history, tradition and modus operandi, I believe that the points that follow hold true for most, if not all, political systems.

The main obstacle to entering parliament has to do with political parties and how they operate. In most countries, political parties are indispensable to the working of democracy. They aggregate political interests and provide voters with policy choices, which they then bring into the work of parliament and government. In many electoral systems, they act as gatekeepers to parliament, with the power to decide who becomes a candidate for election, and whether they will have a reasonable prospect of winning a seat.

Yet the leadership of mainstream political parties tends to be dominated by men from the majority community, who often choose candidates perceived to be 'safe', i.e. who look like themselves and are perceived to share their values. This process excludes those who have a minority background.

When mainstream political parties put forward minority candidates, it is often in the hope that these candidates will open up new voter constituencies and attract more voters to the party. However, this incentive is often mitigated by a perception of political apathy in those communities resulting from poverty, language and education, as well as a reluctance to participate in political processes that many minorities perceive as being controlled by the majority community. The result is a vicious cycle of systematic exclusion of minority candidates.

Although grassroots movements often campaign forcefully for minority rights and inclusion, these movements have not constituted themselves as political parties. Consequently, they are not able to present candidates for election.

Of course, money is a major determinant in running a successful election campaign. The larger mainstream political parties typically have access to public and private sources of funding that new or small parties simply do not. Parties that specifically represent minority interests often fall into this second category.

Many members of parliament argue forcefully that special measures, such as reserved seats or a requirement for political parties to include minorities as electoral candidates, are the only way to address systematically the exclusion of minorities. Yet, others reject, equally forcefully, all forms of affirmative action in favour of minorities. They argue that political parties must look inside themselves and realize that diversity is the way of the future in multicultural societies.

The obstacles faced by minorities in entering parliament are largely the same that women face. Male dominated political parties, inequality in society as well as lack of access to funding have for generations excluded women from gaining access to parliament. It is therefore not uninteresting to note that where women are now able to overcome these obstacles and enter parliament in significant numbers, it is through a combination of measures which invariably include a massive doses of awareness raising campaigns and some form of quota or affirmative action.

The second aspect concerns the effectiveness of minority parliamentarians in the work of parliament. Again, the obstacles are numerous. Racism exists in some parliaments. There is always a risk of tokenism, especially with reserved seats, if the minority parliamentarian does not build or maintain a strong relationship with the community outside parliament.

The bulk of legislative work is done by parliamentary committees. It is therefore important for parliamentarians to belong to committees in their area of interest so they can influence their work. Here again, however, the selection process is usually controlled by the political parties which seek to balance the competing interests of all their members. Access to the most prestigious and influential committees, such as Finance Committees, is very difficult for minority parliamentarians to achieve.

In most parliaments it is essential to hold leadership positions in parliament in order to be able to advance one's legislative agenda. These positions, such as membership of the bureau of parliament, chair of a committee, or party whip, are limited and competition is fierce. Yet without support from parliamentary leaders, minority parliamentarians experience difficulty in moving legislation that they have drafted through the legislative process, or even getting it onto the parliamentary agenda.

The limited number of minority parliamentarians in most parliaments also makes it difficult to exert influence. One solution put forward by some MPs is to set up formal or informal minority caucuses although partisan politics can make cross-party cooperation among minority parliamentarians difficult or impossible. More transparent procedures for the nomination of parliamentary committees and sensitization on diversity for all parliamentarians were among the suggestions made by the parliamentarians we interviewed.

The IPU will continue to gather data and examples of good practice on minority representation. Our objective is to increase knowledge of minority representation in parliament and help place this issue firmly on the agenda of parliaments and political parties. We believe that this Forum can make an important contribution to bringing about more inclusive parliaments and look forward to integrating your conclusions and recommendations into our work.

Thank you.