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Tolerance and Peace Through the Portuguese Parliament Action

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Portugal is a small country, but one with great historic achievements and conquests. It was the first country in Europe to abolish the death penalty. Portuguese people are, by genetic definition, resilient. Citizens with this DNA are living proof of what John F. Kennedy had long been trying to teach: “If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.”

The Assembly of the Republic is the most important institution in the Portuguese political system, where legislative power is exercised, an open house that scrutinizes all the actions of the highest executive body in the Portuguese political system, and also empowers the youngest to be future leaders.

The Parliament has developed several instruments that enable tolerance and peace to take place, not only through the work of the standing committees but also through diplomatic interventions.

Under the complete respect of the principle of separation of powers, the Portuguese Parliament develops an outstanding role in the democracy and the satisfaction of the basic needs of the people living in this territory, maintaining tolerance and peace.

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It is with enormous honor and admiration for the role of the Global Council for Tolerance and Peace across the world, in its President, H. E. Ahmed

Aljarwan, that I give my testimony, as Vice President of the Portuguese Parliament to the contribution of this Institution in these matters.

The 21st Century reveals long and diverse experiences throughout a multicultural world developing at different paces.

As Konrad Adenauer said, “We all live under the same sky, but we don’t all have the same horizon.”

Compared to others, Portugal is a small country but one with great historic achievements and conquests. It showed its universal and globalizing genesis early on, facilitating a meeting of different peoples and cultures, and sharing with its peers, the maritime knowledge it ventured to discover.

Portugal is a young democracy, achieved through the use of flowers, instead of the brutality of rifles and their ammunition.

It was the first country in Europe to abolish the death penalty, thereby providing compelling evidence of the humanism and pacifism inherent in the people of this great nation.

Doing justice to their fearless spirit, the Portuguese regularly leave their homeland to settle all over the world, often facing extreme difficulty. However, thanks to their tolerant, peaceful, and friendly spirit, they always manage to be effortlessly integrated into their host communities, ultimately being regarded as “children of the land.”

Portuguese people are, by genetic definition, resilient. Despite the recent economic crisis that the country went through, all demonstrations of dissatisfaction and of the difficulties experienced were peaceful. The world did not witness demonstrations resulting in serious injuries or other significant consequences. This is the Portuguese DNA.

Citizens with this DNA are living proof of what John F. Kennedy had long been trying to teach: “If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.”

In an essay of the Francisco Manuel dos Santos Foundation, Jorge Fernandes states that the Assembly of the Republic is the most important institution in the Portuguese political system.

It is right here, in the Portuguese Parliament, that legislative power is exercised. This body is made up of women and men representing the citizens who elected them to be the active voice of their will, as reflected in the electoral program put to the vote.

In this sense, the Portuguese Parliament is an open house, available to welcome all those who wish to present their ideas. This house of democracy set up a program specially aimed at young people who wish to experience the role of members of parliament: whether it be by hosting groups of young

people who put forward and discuss their ideas at the Parliament or by taking the Parliament and this experience to local schools with the help of Members of Parliament belonging to all political factions within their constituencies.

These experiences strengthen young people, empower them, and show them that they can find solutions to most of the issues that need solving in the daily life of governing a nation by presenting and debating ideas while maintaining peace and security in its territory.

Another significant milestone that distinguishes the Portuguese Parliament is the Human Rights Prize, created on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and which established the annual award of a monetary amount to reward the work of non-governmental organizations, prominent individuals, or other outstanding acts in this field.

It should also be mentioned that the world has witnessed a massive migration phenomenon at the beginning of this century, as a result of the wars still going on today, forcing populations to flee their countries to save their lives.

Europe has been the quintessential destination of this migration cycle, being under an enormous amount of pressure. Even at an earlier stage, the Portuguese Parliament and the legislation it produced have allowed Portugal to have been internationally recognized on several occasions as one of the best and most welcoming countries in the world. Last year, the United Nations distinguished the Portuguese migration services.

Parliamentary Groups of Friendship are a prominent figure for peace and tolerance also established by the Portuguese Parliament. They are set up between parliamentarians from different countries who may or may not have similar interests. However, they translate into a means of defining strategies for dealing with migration issues and the inclusion of other affairs, cultural differences, various legislative procedures, and cooperation in the field of membership of international organizations, among other advantages.

The first standing committee at the Portuguese Parliament, the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, Rights, Freedoms, and Guarantees, specializes in matters of tolerance and peace. They are responsible for matters including human rights, justice and correctional affairs, electoral law, migration and asylum issues, cross-cultural dialogue, border control, equality and non-discrimination, the fight against trafficking in human beings and domestic violence, as well as the protection of children and young persons at risk and of the elderly.

In this regard, it should be noted that Portugal was the first Member State of the European Union to ratify the Istanbul Convention: Council of

Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. This Convention, which entered into force on 1 January 2014, resulted in the production of advanced legislation by the Portuguese Parliament, leading to fruitful actions in Portuguese society.

Nevertheless, maintaining the peace among the people of a nation requires meeting their basic needs, such as the supply of energy, water, housing; matters for which other standing committees are responsible (this distribution may vary in each legislature following the legislative elections preceding them).

In addressing these issues, with goals that can be achieved by different policy options, as is often also the case with environmental problems, public interest outweighs disagreements, and Portuguese parliamentarians frequently use a legal instrument which enables them to make recommendations to the Portuguese executive in order to ensure that solutions are found.

This was the case in the 13th legislature when all political forces came together and endorsed a resolution calling on the Government to draw up a mapping of housing needs in the country, as well as to examine solutions to address these shortcomings.

This is why, on top of the primary role of legislating, the Portuguese Parliament is “the most important institution in the Portuguese political system”, which, in addition to recommending actions to the Government, has the power to scrutinize these and all other actions of the highest executive body in the Portuguese political system.

This scrutiny takes place in fortnightly debates, in which all members of the Government go to the house of democracy to “report” to the parliamentarians elected by the Portuguese people, but also in emergency debates requested by various political forces, as well as through parliamentary consideration of the diplomas drawn up by the executive body while exercising its power.

At the initiative of individual Members of the party groups to which they belong or even of the standing committees of the Assembly of the Republic, the Portuguese Parliament also has the power to hold field visits to assess situations to be addressed, such as, for example, the poor living conditions of a community of second- and third-generation Cape Verdean immigrants residing in Portugal, and to use the instruments provided for by the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic to act or arrange for the competent authority to do so.

All these means of action at the disposal of the Portuguese Parliament empower this institution as a significant and indispensable instrument for peace and tolerance in Portugal, as well as for Portugal's relations with its peers, bringing it closer to the population and opening it to their contributions, through the scheduling of hearings with Members of Parliament, parliamentary groups, or committees.

Always making use of its open and cooperative spirit, the Portuguese Parliament welcomes, on an institutional basis, delegations of other countries seeking information to compare existing legislation, practices, and results. Besides, there are exchanges of officials and staff with Parliaments in other countries, usually PALOPs — Portuguese-speaking African Countries, not only to share the knowledge and experience in constructing the Portuguese legal order which has made it possible to achieve this state of tolerance and peace in the country but, like all things in life, to allow for the acquisition of new knowledge, concepts, and also very productive ideas.

For all citizens to have access to parliamentary life, there is also an openly broadcast channel, ARTV, broadcasting the debates of the legislature, interviews with Members of Parliament and showing the actual Parliamentary area so that all citizens feel involved in democracy and political life in an inclusive manner. Political life in Portugal stands for tolerance and peace in the world as well: when we witness, for example, votes of condemnation, endorsed by all political forces, of the massacres of innocent people reported on all television channels.

The good diplomatic relations maintained by the Portuguese Parliament are also essential and indispensable nowadays for tolerance and peace throughout the world, thus keeping its historical tradition of external diplomacy.

The media operate today as an actual “particle accelerator” and the Portuguese Parliament, aware of this reality, does not overlook it and promotes information events on the infamous *fake news*. The role of the media is examined and scrutinized in one of the Parliament's standing committees, and all parliamentarians are aware of the harmful consequences of false information and of potential ways of recognizing it, as it can result in intolerant reactions that can disrupt the peace created in the Portuguese territory.

The principle of separation of powers applies in Portugal: legislative, executive, and judicial power. This separation is essential for peace-keeping, but the role of the Parliament is crucial also in this field since it legislates for the judicial power to implement the laws it produces.

Besides, even if doubts sometimes arise as to whether the judiciary is sexist, and whether there is gender stereotyping in judicial decisions, as reflected in Nelson Tavares's master's dissertation at the University of Coimbra, the law is increasingly equalitarian and has shown considerable development since 1988. Nonetheless, we must not forget the preconceived beliefs that could call into question the very impartiality of the judge, and that the law is responsible for paving the way for the necessary change in mind-sets leading to the equality required nowadays.

This is the only way for the Portuguese Parliament to help to ensure that tolerance and peace continue to prevail in our country as well, and, through some of its already mentioned instruments, share this path with its peers so that tolerance and peace are an achievement of the world and for the world.

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