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A Democracy That Listens, Includes, Responds, Accounts, and Delivers

For 18 years, International Day of Democracy has called the world to reflect, act, and strengthen democracy, reminding us that democracy is more than choosing leaders; it is about ensuring every voice counts, every right is protected, and every citizen has a meaningful place in governance. True democracy delivers when inclusion and human rights remain at its core.

On this International Day of Democracy 2026, the Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development (IRIAD) and The Electoral Hub joins the global community in reaffirming its commitment to strengthening democratic governance and resilience through promoting and advancing participation, human rights, gender equity, inclusion, accountability, transparency, responsive governance, and effective and ethical public institutions.

Observed annually on 15 September, the International Day of Democracy provides an opportunity to reflect on the state of democracy and renew our collective commitment to deepening democratic governance. As we mark 18 years since the International Day of Democracy was first observed in 2008, this year's commemoration offers an opportunity not only to celebrate democratic progress but also to confront the barriers that continue to prevent many people from participating fully and equally in public life and democracies.

The **United Nations' 2026 focus, “When Every Voice Counts, Democracy Delivers,”** places citizens at the heart of democracy. It reminds us that democracy must go beyond the right to vote by creating meaningful opportunities for people to be heard, access information, influence decisions, engage public institutions, and hold those in power accountable as well as enjoy welfare – **‘Dividends of Democracy’**. Complementing this message, the **Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2026 theme, “Bring Human Rights into Focus,”** highlights the central role of human rights in sustaining democratic societies and the responsibility of parliaments and other arms of government to protect rights, freedoms, civic participation, and those who speak up for others. Together, these themes reinforce a fundamental truth: democracy cannot be meaningful without participation, and participation cannot be meaningful without rights.

Democracy extends beyond elections. While credible, inclusive, peaceful, and transparent elections are fundamental to democratic governance, democracy must also be sustained between election periods through effective lawmaking, transparent budgeting, public consultations, oversight, civic engagement, access to information, and public service delivery. Citizens should have opportunities to engage their representatives, contribute to public decisions, influence policies and priorities, and hold institutions accountable. Democratic participation must therefore be continuous, meaningful, and capable of influencing outcomes.

The strength of democracy is also reflected in how citizens experience governance. Public institutions must be responsive to people's needs, transparent in their decisions, accessible without discrimination, accountable for their actions, and effective in delivering public services. When citizens can access information, raise concerns, engage decision-makers, and see their participation reflected in outcomes, trust in democratic institutions grows. Conversely, exclusion, poor service delivery, limited access to information, and weak accountability can deepen public distrust and weaken democratic institutions.

Human rights provide the foundation for meaningful democratic participation. Freedom of expression, access to information, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, equity, non-discrimination, and the protection of civic space enable citizens to participate freely and safely in public affairs. Where people cannot speak freely, organise, access information, or challenge decisions, democracy is weakened. Protecting human rights must therefore remain central to strengthening democratic institutions.

For IRIAD and The Electoral Hub, putting every voice at the centre of democracy means recognising that citizens do not experience democracy equally. Women, girls, young people, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups continue to face social, economic, political, and institutional barriers that limit their participation and influence. A truly representative democracy must address these inequalities and create equitable opportunities for all citizens to contribute to public decisions and life.

Gender equity is essential to democratic legitimacy. Women must not be seen merely as voters, campaign mobilisers, or beneficiaries during elections, but as leaders, decision-makers, policymakers, and equal participants in political and public institutions. Achieving gender equity requires confronting the structural barriers that limit women's access to leadership, resources, information, justice, and decision-making spaces. Representation must translate into influence, and inclusion must create meaningful opportunities for women to shape the decisions that affect their lives and communities.

The same commitment must extend to young people, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised communities. Young people should be recognised as democratic actors and partners in governance, not engaged only during election campaigns. Persons with disabilities must be able to participate in political and public life without physical, technological, informational, financial, or institutional barriers. Marginalised communities must have opportunities to influence decisions that affect them. Inclusion must therefore move beyond symbolism towards equitable participation, representation, and influence.

CALL TO ACTION

- **Citizens: Use Your Voice.** Democracy requires participation. Speak. Vote. Ask questions. Seek information. Engage your representatives. Join civic initiatives. Participate in community decisions. Challenge injustice. Demand accountability. Do not wait for election day to exercise your democratic power. Your voice matters every day.

- **Governments: Listen, Include, Respond, and Account.** Create meaningful platforms for citizens to participate in decision-making. Protect civic space, freedom of expression, access to information, and other fundamental rights. Strengthen public institutions and ensure that policies and services respond to the needs of the people. Governance must be citizen-centred, inclusive, and responsive.
- **Parliaments and Legislators: Bring Human Rights into Focus.** As highlighted by the IPU's 2026 campaign, parliaments have a crucial role in turning human rights commitments into concrete laws, oversight, accountability, and institutional action. Strengthen laws that protect human rights. Exercise effective oversight. Defend democratic freedoms. Create legislative spaces where citizens' voices are heard. Rights must not remain promises on paper; they must be protected in practice. **Pass the Special Seats for Women Bill Now.**
- **Political Parties: Make Inclusion Real.** Open political spaces to women, young people, persons with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups. Promote transparent and inclusive internal processes and remove barriers that prevent qualified citizens from participating in political leadership. Democracy cannot be truly inclusive if political leadership is not.
- **Civil Society Organisations: Keep Democracy Transparent and Accountable.** Continue to amplify marginalised voices, promote civic education, monitor public institutions, defend human rights, and create spaces for constructive citizen engagement. A strong and independent civil society strengthens democratic resilience and accountability.
- **The Media and Digital Platforms: Protect the Public's Right to Know.** Promote accurate, independent, responsible, and inclusive information. Support informed public debate while challenging misinformation and disinformation that can undermine democratic participation and public trust. An informed citizen is an empowered democratic participant.
- **Women and Young People: Your Voice Belongs at the Table.** Do not accept exclusion as the price of participation. Your voice belongs in community leadership, political parties, parliaments, public institutions, policymaking, governance, and every space where decisions about your future are made. Do not simply ask for a seat at the table. Help shape the decisions made at the table.

On this International Day of Democracy, **IRIAD and The Electoral Hub** calls on all Nigerians to move beyond seeing democracy solely as an electoral process and embrace it as a continuous practice of participation, rights, accountability, inclusion, and responsible citizenship. We call on government institutions to listen more, include more, respond better, and remain accountable. We call on parliaments and political leaders to bring human rights into focus and ensure that laws and policies protect the people they represent. We call on citizens to participate, speak up, ask questions, engage institutions, and demand accountability.

We call for a democracy in which every citizen can participate meaningfully, women and girls have equitable opportunities to lead and influence decisions, young people are recognised as

democratic actors, persons with disabilities and marginalised groups can participate without discrimination, and public institutions deliver transparent, responsive, and accountable governance.

Democracy must be measured not only by how leaders are elected, but by whether citizens can influence decisions, exercise their rights, access essential services, and participate equitably in shaping their communities and country. Gender equity, inclusion, human rights, accountability, and responsive governance are not separate from democracy; they are fundamental to making democracy work.

As we mark International Day of Democracy 2026, let us renew our commitment to a democracy that listens, protects rights, values every voice, and delivers governance that is inclusive, equitable, transparent, and accountable.

**When every voice counts, democracy delivers. Bring Human Rights into Focus
Let us listen to more voices. Let us protect more rights. Let us open more spaces for
participation. Let us build institutions that serve the people. Because democracy
belongs to everyone**

**#InternationalDayofDemocracy2026 #ListenIncludeRespondAccountAndDeliver
#CitizenCentricGovernance #WhenEveryVoiceCountsDemocracyDelivers
#BringHumanRightsIntoFocus #DemocracyElectionsAndGovernance
#HumanRightsAndRuleOfLaw**

Signed

Princess Abijah Hamman-Obels, **Director | The Electoral Hub**

Phone: +234 908 6998 850 +234 704 7998 525

Twitter: @electoralhub and @iriadev

Instagram: @electoralhub, @theelectoralforum, and @iriadev

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Website: <https://www.electoralhub.org> <https://www.iriadng.org> and
[electoralforum.electoralhub.org](https://www.electoralforum.org)

ABOUT IRIAD AND THE ELECTORAL HUB

The **Initiative for Research, Innovation, and Advocacy in Development (IRIAD)** is committed to strengthening democratic governance by advancing public accountability, citizens' participation, women's rights and gender justice, and strengthening the capacities of governance institutions to be responsive, responsible, accountable, effective, and ethical

The Electoral Hub is an interdisciplinary knowledge, policy, and advocacy hub committed to promoting electoral knowledge, inclusion, accountability, and integrity

**Knowledge | Innovation | Inclusion | Impact
#Advocacy #Results #Impact
..... promoting electoral knowledge, accountability, inclusion, and integrity**