



Feature Article
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Representation at the Inter-Parliamentary Union: Sahiba Gafarova's Bid for the Presidency

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The region of Central Asia and the Caucasus has never been represented at the helm of the Inter-Parliamentary union. This year, however, this could change. Azerbaijan's Speaker of Parliament, Sahiba Gafarova, is making a bid for the presidency. Aside from being the first person from the region at the position, she would also be only the fourth woman to have this prestigious role. Building on her national profile as well as numerous international engagements, Gafarova has also applied parliamentary diplomacy with her counterpart in Armenia.

From October 5th to 9th, parliamentarians from around the world will gather in Arusha, Tanzania, for the [153rd Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union](#), where the organization's Governing Council will elect its next president. Founded in 1889, the IPU is the world's oldest multilateral political organization and brings together 183 national parliaments. Its work co-



vers a broad range of issues, from peace and security and human rights to sustainable development and the role of parliaments in international affairs.

The presidency is more impactful than its relatively low profile outside parliamentary circles might suggest. The IPU president is the political head of the organization, chairs its Governing Council and Executive Committee, presides over its statutory meetings and represents the organization at international events. The mandate lasts three

years, and the president must remain a sitting member of parliament throughout the term. The current president, Tanzania's Tulia Ackson, was elected in 2023 and will be succeeded following the Arusha Assembly.

Three candidates are standing for the 2026 to 2029 term: Sahiba Gafarova, Speaker of Azerbaijan's National Assembly; Milton Dick, Speaker of Australia's House of Representatives; and Rojo Edwards Silva, a senator from Chile. Their candidacies come from three different geopolitical groups within the IPU - Eurasia, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

The IPU has six geographical groups, created in the early 1950s to help distribute positions within the organization more fairly. The IPU describes them as a mechanism for ensuring fair representation of different parts of the world within its structures, seeking regular rotation of its presidency among the geopolitical groups. Looking at the record of the past quarter century, however, one group has been missing from that rotation. Indeed, the presidency has been held by parliamentarians from the Arab world, Europe, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa, while the Eurasia Group has never produced an IPU president.

That per se does not create an automatic claim to the position for any particular Eurasian candidate, as the president has to represent the entire organization, and the three candidates bring different and valuable parliamentary and

international experiences to the contest. The absence of Eurasia from the presidency nevertheless provides a relevant backdrop to this year's election, particularly as the region has become increasingly visible in international discussions on connectivity, security and relations between major powers.

Azerbaijan's own parliamentary diplomacy offers an interesting entry point into this question. Since joining the IPU in 1993, the Azerbaijani National Assembly, commonly known as Milli Majlis, has become increasingly active in regional and cross regional parliamentary organizations. This has included leadership roles in the [Asian Parliamentary Assembly](#) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the [Black Sea Economic Cooperation](#), as well as the Parliamentary Network of the [Non-Aligned Movement](#). Azerbaijan has also been active in other regional parliamentary formats, including the [Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States](#), which is headquartered in Baku.

For Azerbaijan, parliamentary diplomacy has developed alongside a broader effort to maintain relationships across different regional groupings, and the country's geographical position helps explain part of this approach. Indeed, Azerbaijan sits at the intersection of the South Caucasus, the Caspian region and wider Eurasian connectivity routes, while its participation in the Non-Aligned Movement has given it a political network extending well beyond its immediate neighborhood. Its parliament has consequently been used to operate in settings that bring together countries with very

different political systems and foreign policy priorities.

Gafarova's own parliamentary career has developed within this increasingly active multi-lateral environment. She has been a [member of the Milli Majlis](#) since 2010 and became its first female Speaker in 2020, before being re-elected in 2024. During this period, she has taken leadership roles in several interparliamentary structures, giving her experience with different geographical constituencies rather than concentrating her international activity within a single regional framework.

Her chairmanship of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation provides one example. Azerbaijan assumed the PABSEC presidency in the second half of 2024, with Gafarova serving as chair until the presidency was transferred to Bulgaria in June 2025. During her tenure, the organization brought together parliaments from countries around the Black Sea, including EU and NATO members alongside states with different relationships with both European institutions and Russia. The Asian Parliamentary Assembly offers another example, with Azerbaijan assuming its chairmanship in 2024 and Gafarova representing the Azerbaijani parliament throughout that period. The chairmanship focused partly on strengthening the assembly's internal coordination and its cooperation with other parliamentary organizations. As for the Non-Aligned Movement Parliamentary Network, Gafarova currently chairs the network, which held its fifth conference in Istanbul in April

2026 with delegations from approximately 50 countries and international organizations. The network has sought to develop a parliamentary dimension to the Non-Aligned Movement and to strengthen contacts among legislators from Africa, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the Global South.

Gafarova's recent international activity has also extended beyond these organizations. In 2026 she participated in the Conference of Speakers of National and Regional Parliaments of the Pan-African Parliament and met with the president of the Pan-African Parliament in Baku in September. During that meeting, the Pan-African Parliament and the Non-Aligned Movement Parliamentary Network signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at developing cooperation between the two institutions.

Alongside this, one of the most sensitive dimensions of Gafarova's parliamentary diplomacy has been her engagement with Armenia's parliament. Her meetings with Speaker Alen Simonyan have taken place repeatedly under the IPU framework, including in Geneva in 2024 and 2025 and in Istanbul in April 2026. The latest meeting was presented by both sides as part of the continuing normalization process, stressing the importance of parliamentary dialogue and contacts between their delegations as a source of confidence building. Simonyan subsequently described the meeting as having gone well, saying that the two sides had encountered no disagreements and had discussed mutual understanding, cooperation

and future plans. Armenian media likewise highlighted the constructive character of the encounter. For Gafarova, these meetings have provided an opportunity to engage directly with an Armenian counterpart on a politically sensitive relationship while operating within the multilateral setting of the IPU.

Taken together, these activities illustrate the different levels at which parliamentary diplomacy operates. Gafarova has worked through regional organizations such as PABSEC and the Asian Parliamentary Assembly, wider political networks such as the Non-Aligned Movement Parliamentary Network, and the IPU itself, while also maintaining direct parliamentary contacts in a particularly sensitive regional context. The meetings with Simonyan are especially relevant in this regard because they show how the IPU can provide a setting for dialogue between parliaments whose governments have historically faced profound disagreements.

Another factor to be taken into account is the gender dimension. Women remain significantly underrepresented in parliamentary leadership worldwide. According to [IPU's data](#), women hold 27.5 percent of parliamentary seats globally, while women occupy only 19.9 percent of parliamentary speakerships. The latter figure declined from 23.7 percent a year earlier, highlighting how slowly progress in political leadership has been moving. The IPU has itself made women's political participation a longstanding institutional priority, with its Forum of Women Parliamentarians

and related mechanisms placing issues such as women's political representation, violence against women in politics and gender sensitive parliamentary practices on the organization's agenda. The current election therefore comes at a time when the question of women's presence in parliamentary leadership remains particularly relevant.

Gafarova's candidacy has significance in this context because she already occupies the most senior parliamentary post in her country. Her parliamentary work has also included issues related to gender equality and violence against women, alongside questions concerning migration, refugees and internally displaced people. If elected, she would also be only the fourth woman to hold the position. The organization's previous women presidents were Najma Heptulla of India, Gabriela Cuevas of Mexico and the current president, Tulia Ackson of Tanzania.

Gender, however, is only one element of representation. Another relevant institutional question is how different forms of representation interact within the IPU, considering that the organization brings together parliaments from countries that vary enormously in political systems and international outlook. Its leadership has to deal with a much wider political environment than that of any individual regional parliamentary assembly, and this is where the Eurasian dimension becomes particularly significant. Eurasia has never reached the presidency despite the IPU's stated practice of rotating the position among its geopolitical groups.

This factor is relevant because the IPU's geographical groups are intended to make the organization more representative, while the presidency is one of the most visible positions through which that representation is expressed internationally. The current election therefore provides an opportunity to consider how geographical rotation should function as the organization continues to expand its agenda.

The election will ultimately be decided by the IPU Governing Council, and the three candidates bring different experiences to the contest. Australia's Milton Dick has served as Speaker of the House of Representatives since 2022 and currently represents the Asia Pacific Group within the IPU Executive Committee. Chile's Rojo Edwards Silva is president of the IPU's Latin America and Caribbean Group and has participated directly in negotiations and deliberations within the organization. Gafarova brings the experience of a national parliamentary speaker alongside leadership roles across several regional and cross-regional parliamentary institutions.

A Gafarova presidency would bring Eurasia to the organization's highest political office for the first time and place a woman from the region at the head of the IPU. If the presidency moves elsewhere, the question of how Eurasia fits into the organization's rotation will remain open. In either case, the election brings questions of geographical balance and the role of Eurasia within the IPU's leadership into sharper focus, providing a useful indication of how the organization's principle of broad regional representation is likely to evolve in the years ahead. Gafarova's meetings with Armenian parliament speaker Alen Simonyan also illustrate the extent to which parliamentary diplomacy can provide channels for dialogue across political divides that are often difficult to address through other international settings, and her experience in this would also be relevant to an organization whose purpose depends on maintaining dialogue among members with very different political positions.

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