



**PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN DIFFICULT SETTINGS
CEPPS ROUNDTABLE, APRIL 29, 2002, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**Panel on Building a Competitive, Multiparty,
Democratic Process**

Discussion Paper by: Ivan Doherty, NDI

Introduction

The global democratic revolution of the past decade has demonstrated that people regard democracy as a necessity and a right in and of itself, and not merely an aspiration to be balanced against or even overshadowed by other national or economic interests. Truly open and democratic systems of government are not a threat to individual or communal welfare, but rather provide the means by which a nation can attain its full potential, both economically and politically. Democracy requires working democratic structures: legislatures that represent the citizenry and oversees the executive; elections in which voters are free to choose their leaders; judiciaries steeped in the law and independent of outside influences; a system of checks and balances within society; and institutions and leaders that are accountable to the public.

The active support and collaboration of strong, inclusive political parties in partnership with a vibrant civil society is fast gaining acceptance as the correctly balanced equation to achieve a more transparent and participatory system of government. In strengthening democratic institutions in new or transitioning democracies, it is not a matter of having to choose between building a strong civil society or strengthening political parties and political institutions, such as parliaments. The real challenge lays in balancing support for democratic institutions and organizations that are more accountable and inclusive, while at the same time, continuing to foster and nurture the development of a broadly based and active civil society.

The Importance of Political Parties

In a modern society, democracy cannot function without political parties. Political parties aggregate and then represent social interests, providing a structure for political participation. Parties act as a training ground for political leaders who will eventually assume a role in governing society. In addition, parties contest and seek to win elections in order to manage government institutions.

Political parties nominate candidates, organize political competition, unify portions of the electorate, and translate policy preferences into public policies. When out of power, they provide a constructive and critical opposition by presenting themselves as the alternative government voters may wish to choose — thus pressuring the incumbents to be more responsive to the public’s interests. Organized political parties serve two fundamental purposes. First, they define and express a group’s needs in a way that the public and political system can understand and respond to. Second, they develop common ideas among a significant group in order to exert pressure upon the political system. A principled difference of opinion — and the tolerance of

diversity and dissent that this implies — is an important part of the democratic process. The expression of conflicting viewpoints can actually help to create a better understanding of the issues and to identify solutions. When the political system functions, these exchanges lead to the attainment of new insights or workable compromises essential to the existence of a democratic system. In short, they produce tangible results.

In over two centuries there has been no democracy without political parties. In all of the established democracies, parties have provided orientation for individuals and groups of citizens. Citizens may be divided over ideologies, interests, leaders or policies; parties can organize these differences. In all sustainable democracies the party system must be deeply and durably entrenched in the specific substructures and fabric of society. Parties link the institutions of government to the elements of civil society such as economic, ethnic, cultural, religious and other social groups. The types of linkages may vary greatly but they represent lines of response and control between a party and its constituency. In many Western democracies parties have performed additional social activities in their communities and maintained permanent membership based organizations for more than a hundred years.

Attempts to build a democracy without political parties have failed in the past. Even a cursory study of the history of democracy in the US and France will underscore this point. Two examples of military leaders turned into national heroes during a fight for national independence or liberation and into leading politicians afterwards provide telling examples: Generals George Washington and Charles de Gaulle extremely disliked political parties. Nevertheless, each of them contributed towards the establishment of a new political system that still operates today. Both critics thus ended up founding a stable party-based democracy.

The Problem with Political Parties

In emerging democracies worldwide, political parties are either too weak, too personalistic, too constrained by oppressive governments, or too corrupt and out of touch to earn the respect and support of the public. In Romania, for example, the former communists remained in government for a number of elections until a coalition of opposition parties from across the political spectrum came to power in 1996. The “reform” parties won in a landslide, taking control of both houses of parliament and winning the presidency. Through inexperience and poor inter-party relations, the new government quickly became paralyzed, eroding its support base only to be replaced at the next election four years later. While the ruling coalition was grappling with the problems of government, the opposition PDSR was using the time to reform the party and refine its message so as to make it more attractive to the electorate at the next election.

From Russia to Pakistan to Peru to Venezuela, and other countries experiencing political crises, the troubled state of political parties lies at the heart of the problem. In Russia, anxieties about the state of democracy are clearly linked to the absence of strong, democratic political parties. Ten years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has produced political parties that are strong or democratic but, regrettably, not many parties that are both. As Michael McFaul noted in his review of the six groups that won seats in the Duma in 1999, two are not parties and two are not democratic. The two that are arguably democratic political parties committed to liberal principles and the rule of law together won 14.5 percent of the vote and 49 of 450 seats in

the legislature. Political parties in Russia are weak because powerful politicians have deliberately set out to make them so. President Yeltsin was opposed to political parties and saw no advantage in joining one when he left the CPSU. Though he won two elections himself, he never sought to build an organization based on an enduring program and constituency. His successor, Vladimir Putin, is not a member of any party, though a group supporting him won 25 percent of the vote in the Duma elections. He quickly proposed legislation that would make it more difficult for parties to organize.

There are also a number of countries where political parties have actually lost their mandate to function through their own mismanagement of the political system. In Pakistan, for example, political parties effectively frittered away their credibility to the point where the military's overthrow of the established political order was accepted, if not welcomed, by the citizenry.

Venezuela provides another illustration of what happens in the absence of a credible party system. The current president failed to take control of the country by force in 1992, but yet went on to establish himself as an acceptable alternative to a party system that was viewed as weak, ineffectual and corrupt.

There are also many countries where political parties are banned and repressed, and while much has been made of the lack of political party pluralism, there are no simple answers on how support can be offered to democrats in these countries. Any traces of political activity carry grave dangers for those involved in countries such as China, Burma, Belarus, and Cuba. In June 2000, Uganda held a referendum to decide whether political parties may participate in elections after effectively being banned for more than two decades. The referendum ratified the so-called "no party" system in a process unfairly weighted toward the government's position.

Centralized decision making and the lack of well-institutionalized rules and procedures have eroded public support and discouraged participation in political party activities. An unwillingness to undertake greater citizen outreach and consultation has diminished the public's support, while the transformation of campaigning through the mass media has tended to favor "sound bites" over substance.

Effect of Mass Media and Technology on Political Parties

Polls, focus groups, and voting behavior indicate that in every region of the world, large segments of society view political parties as ineffective and out of touch with their needs. Established parties have experienced an aging and dwindling membership, and young people are hesitating to join or become associated with parties. At the same time, support has risen for independent candidates, special interest parties, and antiparty movements. The new age of mass media and technology has had two effects: diminishing the role of parties in disseminating political information and highlighting cases of scandals and partisan corruption. Political parties have been forced to address these weaknesses and the lack of credibility in a variety of ways. These include placing greater emphasis on issues of ethics in public office, modernizing and democratizing party structures to allow for greater participation, and promoting greater openness and transparency in the operation of government and political systems generally.

Democratization of Political Parties

Political leaders worldwide need to rededicate themselves to the renewal and reforming of political parties and the political party systems by using a new approach. International democracy assistance organizations must support these efforts and make resources available in the form of technical assistance and expertise. The democratization of political parties must be a priority in the efforts to restore public confidence in parties and the democratic process as a whole. Greater citizen participation, accountability of leadership, transparency, and institutional safeguards are more important now, than ever before, for this democratization effort to succeed.

Organizations and institutions that have the commitment and expertise to underpin and promote these initiatives lack adequate resources to do so at present. Equally, the modest efforts currently being undertaken can be undermined by a lack of support from those international organizations engaged in the global democratization effort. This support is not just a matter of financial resources, but also of keener recognition of the critical role of political parties and their leaders. For example, international financial institutions and aid agencies often promote and finance important dialogue between institutions of the state and civil society organizations on key national and local development issues. Party representatives and lawmakers, who represent the foundation of representative democracy, need to be included in such efforts.

Selecting Political Parties for Assistance:

In developing a political party program the situation will vary from country to country and region to region but it should remain a core principle to work with all political parties considered viable, representative, democratic and committed to a peaceful political processes. It is not always practical or desirable to work with every single party in a country, often because not every party will satisfy the criteria. In arriving at these judgments, it is normal to consult widely with experts, analysts and practitioners both inside and outside the country in question. In making decisions about which political parties, movements, organizations or individuals to include in political development programs, many criteria should be considered including:

- democratic commitment and adherence to non-violent principles;
- regional spread and broad base of popular support;
- prominence in politics and likely long-term engagement in political process;
- acceptability of policy positions in respect of creating a truly inclusive society;
- an acceptable level of internal democracy or a stated aspiration to achieve this; and
- receptiveness to technical assistance and ability to absorb and utilize it.

In determining which viable parties to work with, NDI is careful not to exclude or favor particular parties based on their position on general public policy issues. For example, we may have differing views on certain economic or foreign policy issues with a particular party, but these views would not necessarily prevent that party from participating in NDI programs. Undemocratic behavior or the espousing of undemocratic principles would.

Different Approaches in Supporting Political Parties

The scenarios for engaging political parties will vary according to the political landscape of the country while reflecting political realities and resources. Drawing from NDI's experience over the past 18 years, the following cover a wide range of situations.

- **Working with only a single party:** In a few situations it was found that the only way to promote peace and democracy was through programs that assisted a single party. In Northern Ireland in the mid-1980's, the SDLP was the only party in the nationalist community committed to a peaceful and constitutional resolution to the sectarian conflict. The party, which grew out of the civil rights movement desperately needed help to compete with the political aim of the IRA. Other examples in the mid-1980's included the DPP in Taiwan during martial law, the NKDP in South Korea, and currently the NLD in Burma.
- **Coalition of democratic parties facing autocratic forces:** In countries such as Panama and Chile in the late 1980s it was necessary to work in partnership with the democratic political forces that coalesced to confront autocratic regimes. More recently, similar programs have been carried out in Croatia, Serbia and Belarus.
- **Reform oriented or Multiethnic parties:** In order to promote a more genuine multiparty environment it has been necessary to work principally with reform oriented or multiethnic parties that have been severely disadvantaged by a restricted political environment and are struggling to gain a foothold in the political process. Russia, Ukraine and Bosnia are examples of such places. In these situations, however, NDI has looked for opportunities to engage other parties, particularly in parliament.
- **Ruling and Opposition parties – excluding extremists:** Working with political parties, in government and opposition is a way of strengthening the democratic process and nurturing reform initiatives while excluding the more extremist groups that seek to undermine these reform efforts. Georgia, Romania and Montenegro are current examples of this practice.
- **All viable political parties:** There are many examples of programs in democratic settings where all of the main political parties participate. While the program content may vary for each party, their participation is a collaborative effort and sends a strong positive message to the domestic and international communities. In recent years, such programs have been conducted in most Latin America countries, Indonesia, Mozambique, Morocco and Bangladesh
- **Parties that have never participated in democratic process:** While these types of political environment are becoming less common, there were instances in Eastern Europe countries (1989, 1990) and South Africa (1994) where new or previously banned parties never engaged in the electoral process. Assistance was necessary to help level the playing field.

- **Helping to promote a more stable democratic environment:** On occasions an intervention is necessary to assist in securing the advances made towards a more democratic society. Poland is an example where, due to the fractionalization of the center right, nearly 50 percent of the electorate voted for parties that did not meet the threshold for representation in parliament. This created a dangerous disconnect between the citizenry and the representative institutions. By focusing programs on coalition building among center-right parties, a more stable party system emerged.

Spheres of Political Party Development

Broadly speaking, there are three main spheres of political party development in which technical advice and assistance is offered – operational and structural development, political parties in election and in parliament. These activities contribute to the effectiveness of a political party and are complementary of each other. Very often parties require assistance in all of these areas. Depending on the situation – proximity of an election or a change in political environment allowing more freedom for political parties to operate – an appropriate program is tailored, in consultation with party leaders.

Parties, throughout the world, are galvanized into action by an election – it inevitably consumes the energies of the leadership and membership alike. It is the time when members are most energized, when they are most sensitive to suggestions and, unfortunately, most defensive about their behaviour. While a properly structured and effectively organized political party will make a much better impact in an election campaign and achieve greater success, it has often proved difficult to have parties pay much attention to organizational development when there is an election on the horizon. In these situations, it is normal to offer advice and assistance in the area of election campaign techniques with a view to addressing the more fundamental organizational issues once the election is over. Helping parties to structure effective field operations leading to get-out-the-vote (GOTV) and election monitoring (including pollwatching) activities provides one way of touching on organizational issues in the election context.

The operational and structural development of political parties is by far the most important area of programming and is crucial to the underpinning of the democratic process in transitional societies. While a party's ability to wage an effective election campaign will often address the immediate concerns of the leadership and members, the capacity to organize and grow outside of the election cycle serves to create a healthy and competitive multiparty system long after program activities have ceased.

Operational and structural development programs will draw from comprehensive list of program activities including:

- Membership development and recruitment. Utilization of a volunteer membership;
- Message development and issue and policy research;
- External and internal communications;
- Media relations;
- National, regional and local party structures;

- Broadening the party base and outreach to civil society;
- Information technology and database construction;
- Party bylaws and codes of conduct;
- Fundraising and financial management;
- Building relationships with interest groups; and
- Increasing the participation of women, youth and indigenous groups;

Election-related political party programs address all of the activities necessary to structure and conduct an effective election campaign. The energy and activism of election season allows for greater longer-term party development by channeling the energy into building sustainable structures and processes in the party.

Election-related programs will include many of the following topics:

- Strategic planning and developing effective campaign;
- Building a management team and allocating responsibility;
- Motivating and mobilizing the party membership;
- Message/Platform development;
- Communication with the electorate and voter outreach;
- Media relations;
- Candidate identification, recruitment and selection;
- Funding and budgeting;
- Getting out the vote;
- Pollwatching; and
- Polling

Very often, a party's preoccupation with building its organization or engaging in election campaign causes it to overlook the crucial issue of the party's ability to perform in government and the legislature. The legislature is the vehicle through which political parties debate public policy issues. While distinctly different to general governance programs, this area of programming is complementary to the important work of developing legislative capacity. The public perception and profile of a party is greatly influenced by the performance of the party caucus or parliamentary group and individual members of parliament. Political strategies adopted by parties in government and opposition has more of an impact on the electorate than many other activities parties engage in outside of an election. A party can generate a favorable impression with the electorate through an effective and credible performance in parliament. A credible record of representing the interests of the electorate in a consistent manner in parliament through promoting certain policy initiatives in government or opposition and giving innovative and unified leadership is a strong selling point for a party at election time.

Parties in parliament programs cover a range of issues including:

- The role of the parties in opposition and government;
- The rights and responsibilities of government and opposition;
- The structure of a parliamentary group or caucus;

- The decision making process within a caucus;
- Effective use of parliamentary debating time;
- Policy and issue research;
- Effective use of limited resources; and
- Party discipline and the role of a whip.

Clarity on Political Party Assistance Programs

There have been two widely misunderstood notions of political party assistance programs. The first is that party programs are based primarily on the delivery of material assistance. In fact, there may be no more than 12 situations in which material aid was a significant component of direct party development activities and in each case significant limits were placed on such aid. In three of these places (Sierra Leone, Bosnia and Mozambique) material assistance was provided to all the parties. In Nicaragua, Belarus and Serbia, assistance to democratic coalitions was prohibited for direct campaign use. In Niger, material aid was provided for the parties to conduct civic education efforts calling for a return to civilian rule. In Cambodia, assistance was temporarily provided to party leaders who escaped the country following the coup, and assistance was terminated upon their return to Cambodia.

Other types of material assistance have indirectly benefited parties. For example, in Malawi, assistance has been provided for parliamentary committees to conduct public hearings. In Guinea, funds are used to hold inter-party dialogue forums throughout the country. And, in Serbia, more than 20 regional offices, called “Contact Serbia,” are being used to promote links between citizens and representatives of parties, parliament and government.

The debate over the efficacy and scope of material assistance to parties is a legitimate one. There are times when such aid can enhance measurably democratic institutions and processes. In other instances, it can be divisive and divert attention from other, more pressing organizational tasks. In all cases, such material aid should be linked to technical assistance.

The second misunderstood notion is that US-funded party assistance is geared toward an election. This distorted view leads some funders to shy away from political party programs altogether. At the same time, other funders may be attracted to these programs because they offer the hope of a “quick fix”-- of picking winners.

The fact is that most political party development activities are, and should be, longer-term efforts designed to promote a genuine multi-party system and support the development of effective political institutions that contributes to a healthy and vibrant democracy.

A Work in Progress

Over the years we have come to realize that the transition to democracy is not something that can be expected in a short timeframe. Sometimes we detect a certain impatience on the part of those involved in building and strengthening democracies even though history teaches us that building a truly sustainable democracy takes time.

There is no proper instrument for measuring the time necessary for this process because of different ways to count the years of transition and of identifying the end of the process. The evolution of democracy in Britain took over 250. Japan started with a parliamentary monarchy with party government in 1945 yet the first change of governing party only came in 1993 almost 50 years later. Even the United States, which became an independent state in 1783 only started with a party government in 1824 and established the present party in 1856, taking between 30 and 70 years, to fully develop a stable democratic system. Of course, today's nascent democracies should be able to learn from the past, benefit from globalization and not necessarily take as long to progress in every respect.

The incubation period for fledging political parties is much longer than expected by many who fail to understand the deep-rooted foundations that are required. Very often the first few years are devoted to preparing for and contesting elections. Often, there is very little focus on the long-term organizational development of the party until after the second elections.

While some very worthwhile progress has been made in recent years in strengthening political parties as part of the larger democratization effort, much more remains to be done.

- In the area of political party development in particular, and the strengthening of democracy in general, there needs to be a greater concentration of resources in the non-election period. A longer engagement in the country (which is becoming more of a trend) will reap greater results. Political parties are more receptive to assistance in long-term sustainability when not distracted by an election on the horizon.
- A greater effort in developing parties' capacity in parliament and in governance while linking this to increased citizen participation and outreach to civil society. Regularly, political parties are responsible for raising the expectations of citizens during an election campaign and then lack the ability to deal with the ensuing demands when the election is over.
- More assistance in non-election periods focusing on internal democracy and party structure. Lack of democracy and transparency in the decision-making processes within parties is one of the leading causes of dwindling membership and limited interaction with grass-root membership and citizens. More transparent and participative means of selecting candidates, electing leaders and formulating policy would make parties more open, responsive and attractive to citizens.
- Initiatives in skills development for young and emerging leaders, women and, for example, indigenous groups in Latin America. In many countries there is very little concentration on developing new leadership within parties. This is important where party leaders are called to serve in government and have very few skilled replacements in the ranks. It is also an opportunity to introduce the future leadership to measures for party renewal and reform.
- Programs on party finance reform and measures to combat corruption are needed in every region. Political parties need financial resources to sustain an organization and

compete in elections. Unlike the US, in most countries elections are held every four or five years and the campaign lasts for three weeks so the term “campaign financing” is a misnomer. Parties need assistance in developing rules and systems for funding their operations (including the option of public funding) as well as measures for disclosure of donations and limits on expenditure. The recent NDI program in Asia “Political Party Strategies to Combat Corruption” showed that political parties are prepared to put aside partisan differences to address an issue of grave concern to society as a whole and that assistance with ethics related matters and anti corruption measures are in demand.

The inclusive approach of US NGOs to the democratization process and political party development has given them an edge in this field. By remaining neutral, US NGOs have been able to build credibility with political leaders and parties of every ideological base. This practice should continue in the future. The overarching goal is to enhance the institutional capacity and effectiveness of all democratic political parties.