Political Strategy in Closed and Closing Spaces:
A Playbook for Political Parties
Guidance Note for Implementing Partners and Donors

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Introduction and Aim of Guidance Note

Democratic institutions, processes, norms, and values are increasingly under siege by authoritarian forces globally. This situation underscores the urgency for political parties to be equipped with the necessary resources to navigate and sustain their operations within closed and closing civic spaces.

These challenges are not limited to authoritarian and totalitarian states; they also permeate emerging and established democracies. In such environments, champions of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are thrust into a critical competition of ideas against anti-democratic forces over the organization and distribution of political power.

In this context, it is vital for organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to adapt and innovate in their engagement with partners. This manual focuses on guiding NDI's approach to collaborating with implementing partners and donors in closed and closing spaces, offering insights and strategies to effectively support democratic resilience and expansion, even in the most restrictive environments.

NDI, with its longstanding commitment to strengthening democratic institutions, recognizes the evolving challenges of political parties operating in restrictive environments. Spearheaded by NDI's Political Parties Team, the Closed and Closing Spaces Program has developed tools and resources that can be used in such contexts through the following initiatives:

- **Playbook:** The program has published a playbook tailored for political party representatives operating in closed and closing spaces. Aimed at political party leaders, this resource offers essential strategies for successful operations in restricted environments. It encompasses areas such as political strategy formulation, risk management, effective organization, coalition building, strategic communications, and preparedness for democratic transitions.

- **Pilot Trainings:** The program has developed, conducted, and piloted training sessions globally with political party representatives operating in different regions of the world, utilizing the playbook. Training modules have been developed for training facilitators, which include comprehensive talking points and presentation slides to enhance the learning experience.

- **Global Democratic Exchange:** The program has hosted a global democratic exchange conference for political leaders worldwide. The conference facilitated the exchange of best practices and lessons on operating in restricted spaces based on the content of the playbook.

- The aim of this guidance note, paired with the playbook, is to equip political parties, implementing partners, and donors with tools to champion democratic change, fostering a transition towards inclusive and accountable governance systems. The note aims to embolden political parties to strategically tackle the challenges of

operating within constrained spaces, driving towards democratic change founded on respect for universal human rights and the rule of law.

1. Key Definitions

What is a closed and closing space?
- A closing space refers to a situation where restrictions, both formal and informal, are imposed on electoral procedures, civil liberties, and public accountability. This often occurs as a result of actions taken by anti-democratic forces, which can range from ruling authoritarian political parties to dictatorial regimes. The goal of these forces is to suppress democratic opponents and stifle any challenges to their rule.
- Closing political space often occurs through a number of discrete but transparent changes by autocrats in the way a democratic system operates, ushering in democratic backsliding. Often, opposition parties and other democratic forces lack the countervailing power and public support to end these developments.

What are key characteristics of a closed and closing space?
- Labeling democratic parties, movements, and their allies as enemies of the state, foreign agents, or a threat to national security. This labeling is used to justify restricting their ability to communicate, organize, and campaign effectively.
- Creating a narrative that justifies harassment, violence, or other repressive measures against democratic political parties, making it difficult for them to operate freely.
- Compromising institutions that play a crucial role in ensuring a fair democratic process through executive and legislative powers, such as exerting pressure on electoral authorities.
- Using the judiciary for politically motivated prosecutions against leaders and activists from democratic parties.
- Implementing cumbersome registration processes, restrictive laws, and financial regulations to closely monitor and control political opposition and civil society organizations (CSOs), thereby limiting their participation in elections.

The cumulative effect of these measures can result in a sudden and dramatic closure of democratic spaces. In some cases, incumbents may refuse to accept election results and respond with crackdowns to maintain power. In other situations, democratic space is gradually eroded over time, making it increasingly challenging for opposition parties and civil society allies to organize effectively and advocate for democratic principles.

How does democratic space close?
The closing of democratic space is a complex process, often orchestrated by governments, autocrats, and ruling parties with non-democratic agendas. These entities employ a myriad of tactics to restrict civic freedoms and undermine the activities of democratic actors. While each country experiencing democratic backsliding has its unique path, common patterns emerge in how political spaces are closed.

Central to this issue is the concept of one-party dominance, especially when the ruling party exhibits autocratic or illiberal tendencies. Such parties or leaders leverage their control to

systematically diminish the democratic space. This is achieved through a series of calculated steps, including but not limited to:

- **Narrow the definition of 'the people' to only those that support them, while denying the legitimacy of political opponents and ostracizing them.** Frequently conflating political opponents with enemies, criminals, foreign agents, existential threats or subversive to the unity of the country, people's way of life or national security;
- **Silencing opponents through different means, that limit the ability to critically speak out against the government** or reach and organize citizens, mostly through media;
- **Delegitimizing public institutions that can hold governments accountable** by a rejection of the democratic rules of the game, such as violating the constitution, undermining the ability to vote or question the legitimacy of election results, and suspending rights or introducing restrictive civic laws;
- **Creating an environment that 'justifies' a crackdown on political institutions** and individuals and that tolerates, condones or encourages violence against political opponents. Often claiming it is not representative or participatory of citizens, accountable to the public, or compatible with economic growth and "public order".

As outlined above, attacks against pro-democratic actors, including parties, are primarily aimed at delegitimizing their work. The media is then used to reinforce narratives that political 'opponents' undermine national stability or form some other type of threat to the unity or sovereignty of the country. Furthermore, crises, including attempted coups, pandemics, terrorist attacks and economic/financial crises, are often misused to further limit democratic space by autocratic leaders or governments.

Illiberal Toolkit in Closed and Closing Spaces
Autocratic governments, leaders, and ruling parties often employ the following tactics in closed and closing democratic spaces:

- **Judicial Oversight & Independence:** Controlling judicial nominations; undermining the perceived independence of the judiciary; failing to prosecute loyalists while selectively prosecuting political opponents; allowing acts of violence to proceed without legal consequences.
- **Democratic and Pluralistic Political System:** Leveraging state resources to favor incumbents; harassing opposition leaders; misusing anti-corruption measures to target challengers; appointing loyalists to key political and decision-making positions; manipulating elections; enacting reforms that obstruct opposition parties, such as demanding special permits for campaigning.
- **Civic Space & Individual Liberties:** Assessing citizens' freedom to pursue political and civic objectives, ensuring transparency in laws and their enforcement, upholding an impartial public administration, granting citizens access to justice, property rights, and fundamental civic freedoms, restricting freedom of assembly through meeting size limitations, burdensome permit requirements, and harsh responses to unauthorized gatherings, failing to safeguard assemblies from violence or inciting police brutality.

- **Rule by Law vs. Rule of Law:** Implementing burdensome policies and regulations for CSO registration; restricting funding and imposing administrative burdens, especially concerning foreign funding; labeling CSOs as unpatriotic or threats due to foreign affiliations; excluding or over-regulating CSOs in the banking sector under counterterrorism or anti-money laundering pretexts; hindering CSOs' public participation and acquisition of legal status; limiting civil society's resource accessibility, including fundraising and taxation.
- **Independent Media:** Controlling public access to information; examining media censorship levels, harassment of journalists, and potential media biases; understanding the freedom of media discussions and access to unbiased, factual reporting; observing influences like the private sector's acquisition of essential communication outlets, the misuse of taxation against critical media, the inception of censorship laws, and the intimidation of journalists; recognizing bans on dissent, internet blackouts during protests, surveillance, propaganda, and the dissemination of false information to create mistrust.
- **Governing Space:** Evaluating the feasibility of political opposition influencing decisions and participating in elections; analyzing the balance in political competition between incumbents and opposition; scrutinizing adherence to democratic norms, including respecting constitutions and electoral results; ensuring free and fair elections and unrestricted election observation; gauging the effectiveness of checks and balances and the functionality of public institutions; assessing the ability of legislative and judicial bodies to hold executive entities accountable.

It's imperative to understand that **democratic spaces often diminish subtly. Individual attacks can be challenging to identify as threats. Only by examining these actions collectively over an extended period does democratic backsliding become apparent.**

Additionally, illiberal entities increasingly exploit democratic processes to ascend to power, subsequently using these democratic structures to fortify their rule. Given this, the described toolkit developments should not be taken lightly, particularly when several actions by illiberal forces restrict political space. Political entities in such environments face a compound set of challenges, as delineated in *Framework 1* presented below.

Framework 1: Challenges of parties in closing/closed spaces

The diagram shows "Parties in closing/closed spaces" at the center, surrounded by:
- Delegitimized, criticized, attacked, prosecuted or banned
- Unable to fulfil constitutional roles or hold government accountable due to anti-democratic measures
- Absense of political checks & balances + functioning democratic institutions
- No level playing field, specifically for opposition & new-comers
- Difficult to campaign, fundraise, organize or function freely
- Impossible to communicate freely with citizens or criticize government without obstruction
- Unable to hold or run for elected office or participate in free & fair elections

2. Aim of Playbook

The playbook *"Political Strategy in Closed and Closing Spaces: A Handbook for Political Parties"* is published by NDI at a crucial time when democratic institutions, processes, norms, and values are facing escalating threats from authoritarian forces worldwide. The global erosion of political rights and civil liberties has raised concerns about the potential dominance of autocracy as the prevailing governance model, guiding international standards of behavior.

The playbook is written for political party leaders and members who operate in closed or closing spaces. While the strategies employed to address these challenges may vary depending on a party's resources and mission, this publication offers valuable guidance applicable to a wide range of political contexts. The purpose of this guide is to empower parties to plan and organize their work strategically, equipping them to navigate obstacles and facilitate the transition towards democratic systems of government.

If you find yourself turning to the playbook, chances are your political entity may encounter challenges in registering as a formal party, participating in elections, safely recruiting inclusive and diverse candidates, communicating policy proposals, or engaging in inclusive citizen outreach. The playbook aims to assist party leaders in developing practical strategies to promote democracy in closed and closing political spaces.

Although the playbook is primarily tailored for democratic political parties, its lessons and tools hold relevance for a broader range of democratic movements and actors, particularly in systems where establishing political parties is restricted or prohibited. While a clear route to a democratic transition may not always be evident, this guide will aid you in achieving this

goal through enhanced internal democracy and inclusion, all while staying true to your core values, vision, and mission.

3. Outline of Playbook

The playbook offers step-by-step guidance for developing strategic approaches to operate effectively in closed or closing political environments, with a focus on six key areas:

Chapter 1. Developing a Political Strategy: For political parties operating in closed or closing spaces, it is essential to create a well-defined pathway towards achieving democratic change. Chapter 1 provides valuable guidance to help you in the following ways:

- *Setting Clear Objectives:* Develop strategies that establish clear and achievable objectives to promote democratic change despite the constraints of the closed space. Clearly define the desired outcomes and milestones for the party's vision.
- *Resource Assessment:* Assess the resources at your disposal. Identify the resources that are lacking and necessary for promoting democratic change.

Chapter 2. Managing Risk: Organizing a political party in closed or closing spaces comes with significant risks. To effectively navigate these challenges, Chapter 2 offers valuable advice on the following:

- *Systematic Risk Assessment:* Conduct a thorough assessment of the risks faced by your political party. Identify potential threats, vulnerabilities, and areas of concern in the repressive environment.
- *Prioritization of Risks:* Prioritize the identified risks based on their potential impact and likelihood of occurrence. Focus on addressing and mitigating the most critical risks that could severely hinder party activities.
- *Safe Organizing Practices*: Implement measures to organize safely and protect party members from harm. This includes providing security training, establishing secure communication channels, and adopting protocols to respond to potential threats.

Chapter 3. Organizing Your Party: Chapter 3 focuses on assisting you in effectively organizing your party. The chapter offers valuable guidance in two key areas:

- *Structuring for Resilience:* Organize your party's structure in a way that enhances resilience against attacks from anti-democratic and illiberal actors.
- *Inclusivity and Participation:* Ensure the active involvement of historically marginalized and excluded groups in society within your party. Encourage the full participation of women, young people, racial, ethnic, religious communities, and the LGBTQI+ community. Embrace diversity and provide a platform for underrepresented voices to be heard and valued.

Chapter 4. Identifying and Engaging Your Allies: This chapter emphasizes the importance of building strong relationships with democratic actors. It focuses on mobilizing and recruiting potential allies through the following strategies:

- *Building Coalitions:* Form alliances and coalitions with like-minded political parties that share common democratic values.
- *Engaging Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):* Work closely with CSOs that are dedicated to fostering open, democratic, and inclusive political change.
- *Involving Diaspora Communities*: Engage with diaspora communities that are committed to promoting democratic governance in the home country.
- *Collaborating with International Allies*: Establish partnerships with international actors and organizations that are willing to advocate for democracy in closed or closing political spaces.

Chapter 5. Elevating Your Strategic Communications: This chapter focuses on elevating strategic communications to effectively convey the party's vision and values, providing guidance on the following key aspects:

- *Developing Core Messages:* Create clear and impactful core messages that align with the party's vision and values, resonates with the target audience, and communicates a commitment to democratic values.
- *Framing the Political Debate:* Strategically frame political debates to your advantage.
- *Managing Crisis Communications:* Respond effectively to attacks, or adverse events in a way that minimizes negative impacts and reinforces the party's commitment to democratic values.
- *Countering Disinformation Campaigns*: Be vigilant in countering disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining the party's credibility and agenda.

Chapter 6. Preparing for Democratic Transitions: The last chapter focuses on preparing for a transition to democratic rule by providing guidance on two essential aspects:

- *Developing Transition Plans:* Create comprehensive transition plans that outline the party's vision. Define the steps and actions required to smoothly transition from the closed environment to a democratic system of government.
- *Managing the Practical Transition Process:* Effectively manage the practical aspects of the transition, ensuring that the party follows through on its election promises.

The playbook's six chapters can be used individually, in combination, or collectively, empowering political parties to navigate the challenges of closed or closing political spaces when promoting democratic change.

4. Case Study and Programmatic Recommendations

This section presents a detailed case study of Party A, drawing from real-life experiences shared by NDI partners who have actively engaged in the Closed and Closing Spaces Pilot Program. The case study elucidates the challenges and opportunities faced by political parties in closed or closing spaces. This case study isn't merely a recount of Party A's journey; it serves as a prism through which the broader challenges and opportunities for political parties in similar contexts are explored. The aim is to not only detail Party A's experiences but also to provide a relatable framework that helps readers grasp the overarching themes and strategies pertinent to operating in restrictive environments. The case study is followed by an outline of recommendations drawn from the program. The

recommendations are anchored in the insights and strategies presented in the playbooks' different modules.

The recommendations also stem from a comprehensive analysis grounded in real-world examples provided by NDI partners. They are the culmination of insights gleaned from extensive interviews with representatives of political parties and reflective feedback from participants in pilot training sessions conducted under the program. The synergy between theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence from the pilots enriches the recommendations, making them both robust and adaptable to a range of scenarios.

Maintaining Relevance, Organizing, and Communicating with Citizens

Party A, like most parties in closed or closing spaces, was forced to shift from traditional forms of political organization, activism, and advocacy to more targeted engagement with core supporters. The ability of Party A is further limited by, in-country restrictions, imprisonment, prosecutions, and crack-downs of supporters, members, and institutions that are affiliated with the party at the national level.

Organizing in-country has become impossible for Party A and no longer takes place. Instead, they have shifted their focus to organizing abroad, setting up local branches with dedicated leadership teams (president, vice president, and treasurer) in areas where large groups of diaspora and exiled leaders relocated. How active and well-organized branches are, strongly depends on local leadership and, to a lesser extent, the size and activism of supporters that are affiliated with the branch. Each branch is said to have three main objectives: fundraise, organize supporters, and work on diplomatic relations and government outreach with elected representatives of the host country.

Although not a lot of branches seem to actively fulfill these objectives. There are coordinating meetings between branches, but these seem to serve more as check-ins rather than strategic engagements where goals are set or instructions are given. From an organizational perspective the ability of Party A in coming to terms with their exile is highly commendable. They have proactively adapted party processes and organizational structures after exile and have clearly tried to make the most of the new reality, in which they have been forced to operate.

It has also become nearly impossible for Party A to communicate with average citizens in any meaningful way. This is the communication paradox of parties in closed or closing spaces: to protect members and supporters from autocratic regimes, parties need to minimize their communication and political footprint as those trigger further arrests and restrictions, yet parties need to communicate to stay relevant, speak out and reach citizens and new supporters.

These problems are exacerbated by the longevity of the closed or closing space. The longer the party is unable to organize in-country or communicate with average citizens, the less relevant they become and the more hope among supporters diminishes. This prompts them to be selective when and who they engage and complicates message development. Within those confinements Party A does aim to strategically use the small windows of opportunity

that do arise, including organizing around religious and cultural celebrations, using in-country developments, and consistently engaging supporters online as much as possible.

Party A has two primary target audiences: 1) former in-country (elected) party representatives and 2) diaspora and exiled leaders and members. They struggle to maintain contact and communicate with both these groups. To reduce the risk of prosecution, group one is only engaged in very small groups or through one-on-one contacts. Much of the engagement seems sporadic and informed by specific topics. In-country communication continues to become increasingly difficult the longer political space remains closed.

The engagement with group two is more structured, although branches throughout the world seem to lack a uniform approach. Therefore, the approach, quality and success of communication is strongly dependent on the branch. A potential area of improvement could be to provide more strategic guidance to branches on how to organize their communication or engagement. Another challenge of Party A is that they largely seem to be reaching an existing group of aging members. Their branches and diaspora are mostly used for fundraising. The existing party structures do not seem to be actively engaged with member outreach or consultative processes.

The main tools of communication, especially have been Facebook and Zoom for larger groups and WhatsApp and Signal for smaller groups and critical communication updates. A small group of senior leaders and active branch presidents are the main communicators. Party A also has weekly live streams on Facebook, but they mostly seem to reach a core group of existing supporters. The graphic design and content of these online broadcasts are of high quality and easy to access. Relative dormant member groups on social media and messaging apps also tend to become active when there are important developments.

Surprisingly, Party A did not seem to have any protocols for protecting the digital or physical safety of their members. Nor did Party A establish risk mitigation or cyber security management processes. Most communication is relatively open to whoever is interested. Signal was sporadically referenced as a safe environment that was used when necessary, but beyond that Party A did not seem to have made a concerted effort to ensure a safe physical or digital space. Among other things, because digital protocols seemed to be associated with high costs.

Programmatic Recommendations for Democracy Practitioners/Implementers:
In navigating the challenges within closed or closing spaces, political parties must employ strategic resilience and adaptability to maintain proactive and agenda-setting roles. Drawing from the experiences of democracy practitioners, several best practices and lessons learned emerge as vital for success:

- **Support Parties in Communication Flexibility:** Assist parties in developing their communicative agility.
- **Foster Rapid Response Mechanisms:** Encourage the creation of scenarios for strategic communication, rapid response techniques, procedures, and structures that allow parties to swiftly exploit opportunities for democratic change.

- **Counteract Government Narratives:** Support parties in counteracting narratives by the development of communication tactics, counter-narratives, and messaging frameworks that resonate with everyday citizens.
- **Combat Dis/Misinformation:** Provide special training to handle the erosion caused by dis/misinformation from authoritarian regimes, aiding parties in crafting effective responses to these challenges.
- **Enhance Digital Reach:** Given that social media often remains one of the few open channels for opposition parties, guide them in leveraging the potential of digital platforms to boost their outreach.
- **Support Financial Resilience:** Given the financial constraints on opposition parties in such spaces, assist them in developing innovative fundraising strategies and more efficient internal resource allocation.
- **Boost Morale and Engagement:** Offer support and strategies to uplift morale, fostering avenues for leadership collaboration, and promoting democratic transformation.
- **Enhance Secure Communication:** Guide parties in setting up or strengthening their secure communication channels, ensuring their operations remain confidential and free from external surveillance.
- **Fortify Legitimacy and Accountability:** Support parties in bolstering their ties and accountability to local communities, making it tougher for authoritarian governments to undermine them.
- **Promote Citizen Engagement:** Recognizing that a party's legitimacy is reinforced by its connection to the populace, assist in building their capacity for citizen engagement, outreach, mobilization, and inclusive decision-making.
- **Build Capacity in Crisis Communication:** Offer training in crisis communication to help parties effectively manage and respond to emergencies and unexpected challenges, ensuring they maintain coherence and control over their narratives.
- **Strengthen Internal Communication Strategies:** Assist in developing robust internal communication strategies, facilitating better coordination within the party, crucial for navigating closed environments.
- **Counter "Character Assassination":** Provide tools and strategies to counteract disinformation and "character assassination" attempts, empowering parties to protect their reputation and the integrity of their members against unfounded attacks.
- **Broaden Focus on Cybersecurity:** Expand support for cybersecurity measures, emphasizing the importance of protecting digital assets, communications, and data against cyber threats and surveillance.

With the aforementioned focus areas, this section provides a blueprint for implementers like NDI and others in the democracy promotion space, detailing how they can support parties operating under constraints.

Succession Planning and Rejuvenation of Leadership
Party A has no structured succession planning processes to attract, identify, and mentor new leaders. This is becoming a more substantive problem the longer the party is operating in a closed/closing space. Because the existing leadership and support base is becoming older and apathetic there is a necessity to rejuvenate the leadership and membership base of the

party. However, Party A does not seem to have any mechanisms in place to ensure a new generation is mentored to take over the party and fight for the values of the party. Thus, the core supporters increasingly do not extend beyond party members that fled the country or that were already associated with Party A before they were exiled.

As political exile or crackdown is extended younger generations also get increasingly politically disenfranchised with the struggle, values, and party structures of the 'old guard'. Not only because they have come of age during a time in which the party has had limited political success, but also because diaspora youth start losing linkages with the motherland of their parents. So any political involvement or interest they have will often be focused on the current host-country rather than the struggle of their parent's motherland.

Another problem that Party A has encountered with regards to this area is that the party has little to offer aspiring political activists to become involved with the party. Due to the restrictive in-country political context the party is essentially in a state of hibernation. The limited room for communication and political organizing is fulfilled by a limited number of leaders. As a result, party positions that are created are often symbolic and lack influence and standing that youth can aspire to, appeal to their sense of political activism or support their political maturing process.

A by-product of this situation is that leaders do not work their way up through the ranks based on political merit, during which they are tested, are able to hone their political skills, and prove their political leadership. Rather positions and 'leaders' are appointed to relatively superficial and uninfluential positions on the basis of loyalism. Their positions are symbolic rather than substantive. As one interviewee said '*exiled leaders do not exist*'. This situation is further exacerbated because there are no longer party structures outside of the key leadership group that can hold them accountable, including member voices, or ensure inner-party checks and balances, as would be the case if they were operating under normal conditions.

Programmatic Recommendations for Democracy Practitioners/Implementers:
The dynamics of political parties in closed or closing spaces present unique challenges and opportunities. As organizations dedicated to promoting democratic change, implementers can play a pivotal role in guiding these parties through their challenges.

- **Support Succession Planning:** One primary concern in restrictive political environments is the lack of a natural progression for emerging leaders. The traditional mechanism of rising through the ranks based on political merit is often disrupted. Implementers should focus on assisting parties with succession planning, identifying potential future leaders, and providing them with the mentoring and training they need to succeed. The playbook provides an extensive guide on this. This involves creating pathways for leadership development and ensuring that knowledge transfer is systematic and strategic.
- **Reconnect with Citizens:** Political parties, especially those in exile, often find themselves disconnected from the very citizens they represent. It is crucial to understand and cater to the evolving needs and concerns of these citizens to stay relevant. Democracy practitioners should support parties in their efforts to rebuild

and maintain these vital connections, especially at the local level. Organizations like NDI can facilitate dialogue between parties and citizens, employing tools and methods that bridge communication gaps and foster mutual understanding.

- **Cultivate New Supporters:** As parties risk becoming increasingly detached from their traditional support bases, there is an urgent need to identify and engage new supporters, particularly among the younger generation and among women's and marginalized populations. This is pivotal for the party's long-term sustainability. The playbook contains valuable insights on how to spot, recruit, and nurture these new supporters. Moreover, these members often operate without the baggage or profile of established leaders, making them more adaptable in challenging environments. Organizations as NDI can provide strategic advice and practical support for outreach initiatives, helping parties to expand their base in a meaningful and inclusive manner.
- **Diversify Investment in Capacity Building:** While it may seem strategic to invest heavily in individual leaders or a select group, this can be counterproductive. Implementers should advocate for and support a more holistic approach to capacity building that benefits the entire party structure. This includes developing robust party processes, enhancing organizational resilience, and ensuring that parties are adaptable to changing political landscapes.

Diversity and Inclusion

During interviews conducted as part of the program, NDI probed whether Party A provided an opportunity for **better diversity and inclusion**. As centralized in-country party structures no longer became sustainable and leadership spread out across the globe the expectation was that there might be more opportunities for youth, women, and other marginalized groups to become politically involved.

However, this did not seem to be the case for Party A, nor does it appear to be an area of attention for them. Rather the socio/cultural traditional values, norms, and patriarchal societal structures from the mother country seem to continue in party structures abroad, and these still favor seniority and age above political merit. To the extent that there is better inclusion, several interviewees often described it as tokenistic, lacking any meaningful or structural commitment to diversity.

In addition to the reasons outlined above, relatively few youths get involved with Party A because many of them have also been scared to become politically involved. Due to the closed or closing spaces environment the reputation of being involved with politics is even more negative than in most developing countries. As a result, youth is discouraged from getting involved with politics because it can only damage their reputation. And youth that have direct linkages with the main party and whose family still live in the country do not want to endanger their family, while youth who have less linkages and weaker ties also have less understanding for the values and political struggle of the party.

Programmatic Recommendations for Democracy Practitioners/Implementers:
In the ever-changing landscape of politics, especially within closed or closing spaces, the roles of various groups, including youth, women, and marginalized populations, evolve uniquely. Here's how implementers can capitalize on these dynamics to facilitate democratic processes:

- **Leverage Untapped Potential:** Recognize that established parties and senior leaders might be restricted in their operations due to their well-known stances and past activities. However, groups that were previously marginalized, such as youth, women, and other marginalized populations, can often operate more freely. They remain less monitored, face fewer restrictions, and might be unfamiliar to the authorities. This uncharted territory can be advantageous for democratic practices.
- Implementers have a critical responsibility to ensure their activities adhere to a 'do-no harm' principle, prioritizing the safety and well-being of these groups while engaging in political processes. Best practices for organizations like NDI in this field include conducting thorough risk assessments, offering secure communication training, and providing tailored support that respects local contexts and cultural sensitivities. Implementers should, therefore, focus on empowering these groups, offering them training, and amplifying their roles within the party structure. The playbook emphasizes the importance of this outreach and development, highlighting activities such as digital literacy programs, leadership workshops, and advocacy training as means to safely and effectively elevate the political voices of marginalized groups.
- **Promote Decentralization and Inclusivity:** Parties in restrictive environments, particularly those in exile, should reconsider traditional hierarchical structures. With challenges come opportunities. The current environment allows parties to evolve away from a top-down leadership framework and embrace a more diverse, decentralized structure. Implementers can guide parties in harnessing this opportunity, encouraging them to diversify their leadership base. By doing so, the party becomes more resilient and adaptive to challenges. The playbook offers strategies to help political parties recognize and leverage this diversity and inclusivity for a stronger foundation.
- **Focus on Women, Youth, and Minorities:** Acknowledge the specific challenges and barriers faced by women, youth, and minority groups within political parties, especially in closed or closing spaces. Implementers can provide targeted support and capacity building for these groups, ensuring their voices are heard and they are given equal opportunities to participate in political processes. This involves not only training and empowerment but also advocating for policies and practices within parties that promote gender equality, youth engagement, and minority representation.

These strategies underscore the potential benefits of inclusivity and decentralization, making political parties more resilient and effective in the face of challenges.

<u>Strategic Planning</u>
Party A seems focused on keeping members and supporters out of harm's way, preserving the party activists and making sure that they are not further prosecuted or imprisoned. Rather the goal seems to keep activists engaged just enough to be able to activate the dormant network once space opens. The aim, then, is not to have them lose hope without creating false expectations.

The lack of organization in exile was simply seen as the most viable strategy to safeguard against survival. Considering the volatile and restrictive context in which Party A is operating, it is logical that longer term planning has taken a back seat to other party challenges.

Programmatic Recommendations for democracy practitioners/implementers:
In the face of political transition and potential democratic openings, it is essential for opposition parties to have a clear strategic plan. Implementers can play a crucial role in guiding these parties through this journey. Here is how they can support:

- **Strategic Planning for Re-entry**: Implementers should assist opposition parties in devising a comprehensive plan for their return during democratic transitions. This includes:
  - Crafting a robust strategy for both the interim period and post-return scenario.
  - Setting clear objectives for branches operating outside the country (if applicable) to ensure they can contribute effectively to the main party goals while they are in exile.
  - Conducting visioning exercises that help establish a future-focused organizational direction.
  - Ensuring a diverse group of party representatives are involved in these planning stages for a holistic perspective.
- **Building Governing Capacity:** Anticipating potential political shifts is vital. Opposition parties must be prepared to effectively step into a governance role if the ruling party loses power or during democratic transitions. Implementers can aid by:
  - Guiding the establishment of a transition team well-versed in the nuances of governance during change.
  - Training the party on essential transition steps, communication strategies, and expectation management.
  - Providing workshops or resources to help them understand bureaucratic and policy processes vital for service delivery post-transition.
  - For activities in closed or closing spaces, or with exiled parties, organizations like NDI need to adapt their approach to ensure safety and efficacy. This might involve remote training sessions, digital resources for secure communication, and leveraging international networks for support without compromising local party members. Emphasizing do-no-harm principles, such activities should be designed to minimize risks for participants while maximizing their preparedness for potential transitions.
- **Emphasizing the Importance of Democracy Delivery:** For opposition parties, demonstrating a viable alternative to the ruling party's policies and governance is crucial, not just upon assuming power but as a continuous strategy to demand accountability and foster transparency. This approach underlines the essence of democracy delivery, where the opposition parties play a pivotal role in presenting constructive alternatives and engaging in accountability measures.
- Once in power, the responsibility intensifies. The opposition-turned-ruling party must deliver tangible improvements in governance and living conditions, visibly different from the previous regime's outcomes. Implementers should emphasize the critical nature of these deliverables. Achieving noticeable progress not only reinforces the

credibility and appeal of democracy but also guards against regression into authoritarian practices. Facilitating a smooth transition that raises public trust and optimism in democratic governance is paramount.

- By assisting parties in these endeavors, implementers can facilitate a smoother democratic transition, ensuring that the pillars of democracy are not only established but also reinforced for the long-term.

What Has Changed Since the Political Space Closed?

The factionalism that existed in Party A deepened since political space started closing. Although interviewees gave different reasons for this, two stood out: firstly, the initial 'marriage' of factions only made sense in the context of contesting elections. In other words, it was a marriage of convenience that existed within a delicate in-country context, when it benefited both parties.

Without that shared objective the rationale for deepening or continuing collaboration ended and factions returned to their former leadership. Secondly, and more practically the consequence of leaders living in different parts of the world is complicated coordination and structured party engagement. Also, the rationale that existed when they were operating in-country under less closed circumstances is no longer present. Undermining the need and willingness of different factions and leaders to compromise and find common ground.

Programmatic Recommendations for Democracy Practitioners/Implementers
- **Facilitate Organizational Transition for Exiled Parties:** Many parties operate under centralized, top-down management structures. However, evidence suggests that exiled parties should transition to more decentralized, flatter management structures. This allows for broader member involvement, especially when representatives are dispersed globally.
- **Implementers can assist in this organizational shift by:**
  - Leveraging the playbook to share success stories and exemplify the benefits of such a structure.
  - Guiding parties through the required steps for transitioning.
  - Aiding in establishing these inclusive, decentralized management structures.
- **Counteract "Divide and Conquer" Tactics:** Autocratic regimes frequently attempt to undermine opposition parties by exploiting internal rifts or leveraging societal divisions. Implementers should offer support by:
  - Initiating and leading conflict-resolution sessions to bridge internal divides within opposition parties.
  - Promoting trust and team-building exercises that fortify bonds among members.
  - Facilitating mediation between various democratic stakeholders, including reformist elements and the diaspora.
  - Assisting in the development of parties' capacities to manage disputes internally by providing training on establishing and institutionalizing intra-party dispute mechanisms.
  - Sharing best practices and examples of how parties worldwide have successfully institutionalized mechanisms for resolving internal disputes,

thereby ensuring party cohesion and resilience against external attempts to sow discord.

- **Promote Collective Unity:** Solidarity among democratic forces can negate the 'divide and conquer' strategies employed by autocrats. It is crucial to foster unity among opposition entities, reinforcing their collective strength against authoritarian tactics. Implementers can aid in:
    - Facilitating platforms that encourage collaboration among opposition parties.
    - Assisting in generating responsive and genuine coalitions that work in tandem.
    - Supporting the creation and dissemination of unity statements that articulate the shared goals of these coalitions.
- **Strengthening Internal Democratic Structures:** Besides promoting external unity, it is crucial to enhance the internal democratic processes of parties. Implementers can support these objectives by:
    - Guiding parties in mainstreaming the inclusion of marginalized groups, ensuring their voices are integral to decision-making.
    - Offering resources and training to fortify these democratic internal structures.
    - Providing guidance on democratic leader election processes to ensure transparency and fairness.
    - Assisting in developing fair and inclusive nomination procedures for candidates, especially if elections are forthcoming and the party is eligible to participate.
    - Facilitating workshops on effective policy development processes, ensuring they are participatory and reflective of the party's diverse base.
    - Introducing best practices for establishing intra-party dispute resolution and discipline mechanisms to manage conflicts and maintain party integrity.

By supporting parties in these areas, implementers can ensure a more resilient and united front against autocratic tendencies, fostering a stronger democratic environment.
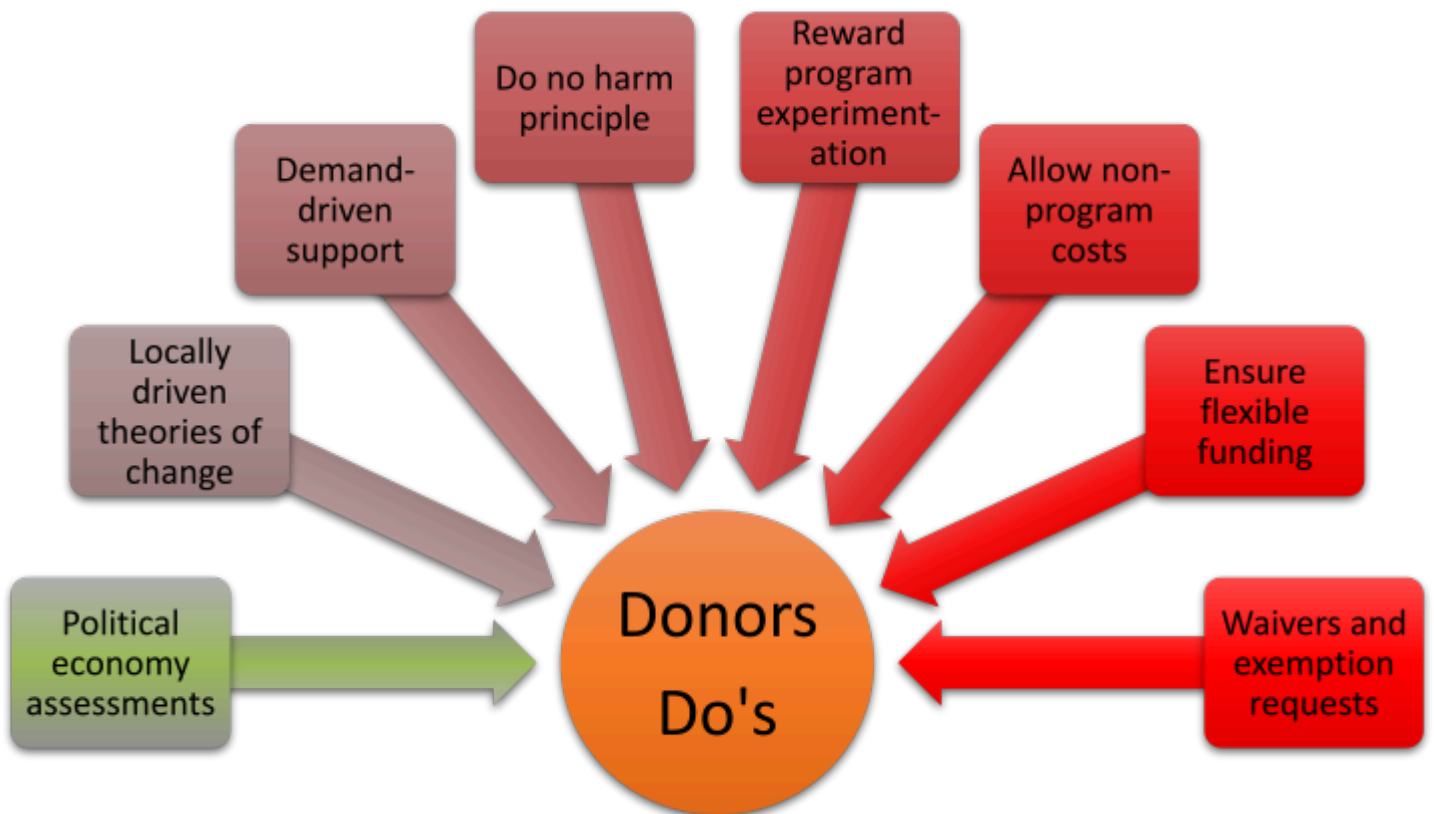
5. Donor Recommendations

As the global landscape sees an increasing number of democratic spaces shrinking or closing, the challenge for donors to effectively support democratic movements and actors becomes paramount. The following recommendations offer a roadmap for donors to navigate their contributions, ensuring they are impactful, sensitive to local nuances, and above all, do not inadvertently harm the very causes they aim to bolster.

- **Comprehensive Political Landscape Evaluation:** Donors should regularly commission political economy assessments. This enables a nuanced understanding of the environment, helping to pinpoint where interventions can yield the most significant impact.
- **Prioritize Local Input and Demand:** Work alongside local partners to develop theories of change tailored to specific contexts. Ensure that any capacity building or programmatic support genuinely aligns with local needs and is not merely supply-driven. Furthermore, implementers should focus on what is realistically achievable within these contexts, managing expectations by setting attainable goals and clearly communicating potential challenges and limitations.

- **Commit to Genuine Do-No-Harm Principles:** Move beyond mere acknowledgement and ensure that all interventions actively minimize potential harm, especially in sensitive political environments.
- **Support Protective Measures for Democratic Activists:** Recognize the unique challenges faced by democracy champions in closed or closing spaces. As such, accommodate non-standard program costs, such as security measures for activists. This becomes especially crucial as traditional funding avenues may not cater to these necessities. Linking with programs that support human rights defenders is vital, providing an integrated approach to safeguard those at the forefront of promoting democratic values. This partnership ensures that protective measures are not only about physical safety but also about creating a supportive ecosystem for their advocacy work.
- **Encourage Programmatic Innovation:** The dynamics in closed or closing spaces require innovative approaches. Reward and support implementing partners who think outside the box, encouraging experimentation and the piloting of fresh strategies. A cookie-cutter approach often proves inadequate in such contexts.
- **Embrace Programmatic Adaptability:** The volatile nature of closed or closing spaces necessitates agility in program operations. Donors should:
    - Offer flexible funding models that can quickly adjust to changing circumstances.
    - Establish rapid response funds, ready to deploy should democratic spaces suddenly open up, ensuring immediate support.
- **Reconsider Reporting Mechanisms:** Given the sensitive nature of the work and potential risks involved:
    - Contemplate waivers on rigid reporting standards.
    - Prioritize the safety of partners by allowing for anonymized data submissions when needed.
    - Foster a culture of trust, understanding the unique challenges of working in closed or closing spaces, and review exemption requests favorably.
    - Incorporate branding and marketing strategies that are mindful of the do-no-harm principle, ensuring programs can operate discreetly where necessary. This might involve tailoring communications to stay under the radar in sensitive contexts, safeguarding both the program's objectives and the individuals it aims to support.

By adopting these recommendations, donors can play a transformative role, bolstering democracy and its champions in some of the world's most challenging contexts.

Framework 3 Donor do's while supporting implementing partners in closed or closing spaces

Diagram: "Donors Do's" with surrounding boxes — Political economy assessments, Locally driven theories of change, Demand-driven support, Do no harm principle, Reward program experimentation, Allow non-program costs, Ensure flexible funding, Waivers and exemption requests.

6. Security Recommendations

In environments where democratic spaces are under threat, security becomes a primary concern, not just for participants and trainers but also for the staff of organizations like NDI, particularly national staff who may face heightened risks.

The commitment to enhancing democratic processes can inadvertently turn individuals and groups into targets for authoritarian regimes, underscoring the importance of implementing robust security measures. Based on the program's experiences, the following guidelines have been developed to help navigate the heightened risks associated with activities in these challenging contexts and to ensure that safety protocols are not only established but also rigorously followed:

- **Tech-Free Training Zones**: During training or capacity building sessions, it is advised to collect all electronic devices, including phones and laptops, at the beginning of the session. This mitigates the risk of unintended information leaks or surveillance.
- **Non-Disclosure Commitment:** Before any capacity building session, have all participants sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). This legally binds them to confidentiality and reinforces the importance of discretion.
- **Safety Protocols:** Draft and regularly update safety protocols that address both digital and physical threats to participants. This should include guidelines for travel, lodging, and in-person interactions.

- **Discreet Communication:** All communication regarding events or meetings should be anonymous and avoid drawing attention. Ensure that invitations and reminders do not include sensitive details and use coded language when necessary.
- **Reliable Communication Platforms:** When digital communication is necessary, use secure platforms known for end-to-end encryption and reliability. Platforms like 'Signal' are frequently trusted by partners operating in restricted environments.
- **Limit Participant Numbers:** It is advised to keep training or meeting groups small. Larger groups not only increase the logistical security challenges but also raise the profile of the event.
- **Intermediary Engagement:** Consider employing intermediaries or international consultants who can operate with a lower profile. This creates a buffer between donors, implementing partners, and beneficiaries, reducing the risk of direct exposure for any one group.

Remember, in high-risk environments, the goal is not just to promote democratic principles but to do so in a way that ensures the safety and security of all involved.

Framework 4 How to ensure security for political party programs in closed or closing spaces:
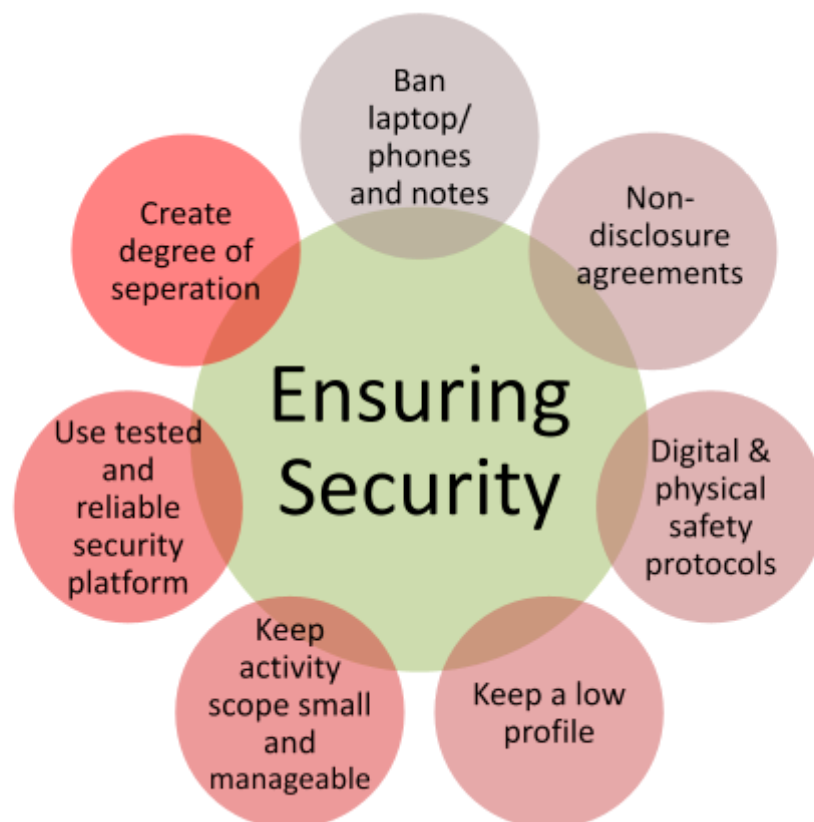
6. Additional Programmatic Recommendations

In this section, we present additional programmatic recommendations tailored specifically for implementing partners, donors, and political parties. These recommendations are strategically crafted to offer actionable guidance and insights specifically in the context of

operating within closed or closing democratic spaces. A total of 15 recommendations are presented, drawn from insights gathered during the pilot phase of our initiatives.

6.1. Flexibility is Key to Program Impact and Success: Flexibility emerges as the cornerstone for program impact and success. The utilization of the playbook in pilot seminars with political party representatives vividly illustrates this fact. Adaptability in program operations and approaches with partners is paramount, especially in countries facing dwindling democratic space. Negotiating through shifting conditions demands a pivot in strategies by both program staff and partners to better respond to political developments.

One of the key adaptations lies in the ability to tailor programs for local and rural contexts, deviating from a sole focus on capital cities or national levels. Embracing this approach opens doors to a wider array of opportunities. Working within these "micro-climates" at the local or sub-national level presents distinct dynamics within and among parties. Here, authorities and national party apparatuses often pay less attention to parties and activists, offering a broader scope to engage with a more extensive network of individuals. Flexibility, therefore, serves as the cornerstone of program impact and success.

6.2. Adopt the Training of Trainers (ToT) Method: The pilot phase of the program found that a fluid program design is important, as unpredictable conditions have required working from third-country locations or with smaller groups of individuals rather than either large group single-party or multi-party activities. Because NDI is working in restricted environments and may be limited in the number of participants it can interact with safely or feasibly, programs have relied more heavily on approaches such as Training-of-Trainers (ToTs) to replace direct NDI-to-participant capacity building training activities.

In this way, NDI can continue to conduct its activities and pass on necessary skills to parties but can maintain safe protocols. It also allows the NDI program to meaningfully engage with partners at all levels, regardless of where NDI is located and how much in-person interaction is possible. While ToTs have always been a part of NDI's overall program approach, current conditions in closed or closing spaces have made ToTs a more fundamental or primary means of activity implementation. They also allow NDI to build a cadre of highly trained and qualified activists who hold the skills and resources necessary to act as party trainers and in-house experts for their organizations. This has become an important element for reasons explained in the next bullet point.

6.3. Targeted Assessments for Democratic Advancement: Implementing a targeted assessment to identify political parties that are committed to advancing a democratic agenda is crucial. This strategic approach not only aligns with the broader mission of promoting democracy but also ensures that support is directed towards entities with the potential to affect meaningful change.

Such an assessment is critical for identifying political parties that, while they may not have representation in the national parliament, possess significant potential for growth or success at local and sub-national levels. Often, public party financing regulations create a challenging environment for these parties, as those not represented in national parliaments typically do not receive government funding. This financial limitation significantly restricts their

operational capabilities and effectively excludes them from participating in decision-making processes.

6.4. Do Not Forget Local Focus: In closed and closing spaces, the lack of government support makes it exceptionally challenging for these parties to gain momentum and visibility. Consequently, focusing on smaller-scale, local level initiatives becomes even more critical. This approach not only enables these parties to continue their work and expand their support base but also offers alternative pathways to influence policies and party programs. By concentrating efforts at the local level, programs can provide these parties with the necessary tools and resources to build their capacity, enhance their visibility, and ultimately, contribute to the democratic process in a meaningful way.

6.5. Work With Individuals and Groups: Political party programs have to be willing to work with individuals rather than just groups, though that seems counterintuitive to party development. Such an approach is needed in closed or closing spaces because these environments limit the space and opportunity for people to take part in activities, create conditions when it can be logistically impossible for security or other reasons for groups of people to participate, and have a consistent group of people is not always available to do the work.

Many parties and political activists working in closed or closing environments are trying to manage situations where they are under increasing bureaucratic or legal pressure from authorities who may be monitoring their activities, , or are dealing with a steady churn of members and activists due to people leaving the country, having to move within the country, or dropping out of participation due to pressure, thus making it difficult to conduct or participate in trainings. So while programs working in permissive environments may be designed to work with identified groups of party members or with selected groups of youth or women activists (as an example), programs working in closed or closing spaces have to be able to prepare for less ideal conditions.

They have to plan for situations when it is less about planning multi-day training sessions with pre-selected groups of people and it is more about how to pass the best information on to capable people in the most efficient way. They are working to find ways to be successful under less than ideal conditions, which often means having to repeat training activities for new activists more regularly, paring down training sessions to make the most efficient use of limited time, and developing resources that can be passed on to participants for their use independently, without the benefit of a formal training activity or program.

Programs also have to work with more varied groups of activists or party members, **as much as it is possible. This is not because they have access to multiple groups but because** closed and closing environments have created high levels of turnover in terms of who is involved in political activity**, due to conditions described above such as brain drain or people being forced by official pressure to drop out of activities. Some NDI programs have expanded their scope beyond the more limited number of groups they may normally partner with and instead have** aimed to identify a wider group of party members and interested community activists to ensure that there is a steady stream of people being trained and prepared should others no longer be able to participate.

One positive byproduct of this more expansive approach to selecting participants is that it has enhanced diversity within parties and among activists by preparing more people with necessary skills, **including many party and community members who might normally not be included in training opportunities. One interviewee operating within a closing space noted that this diversifying of participants has had a follow-on benefit of ensuring that no one person or small group comes to dominate either the viewpoint or approach of a larger cohort, as a wider variety of people are being trained and included.**

6.6. Work With CSOs: In certain country contexts where traditional political party activities face significant restrictions, NDI's strategic adaptation involves collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) and community groups as a means to continue fostering democratic principles. This approach is not just a response to the immediate constraints but also serves as a foundational step for long-term political development. The strategy recognizes that while direct political party work may be currently unfeasible, nurturing a broader base of democracy activists and civic groups can lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and participatory political landscape if and when the space opens up for more conventional party activities.

In this context, NDI's approach of expanding the scope of political development participants to include CSOs and community activists is a pragmatic response to the challenges presented by closed or closing political environments. This method acknowledges the blurred lines between political and civil society spheres in such contexts, where individuals passionate about political change often find alternative avenues for their activism due to the limitations on open political engagement.

The objective is twofold: in the short-term, to sustain the flame of democratic activism even in constrained settings by leveraging the flexibility and lower profile of CSOs and community groups; and in the long-term, to ensure that there exists a reservoir of experienced, politically-minded individuals and groups ready to transition into more formal political roles as opportunities arise. This dual focus ensures that the short-term strategy of working through CSOs directly feeds into a longer term vision of building robust, democratically-oriented political parties.

By fostering partnerships with democracy activists through CSOs, NDI not only adapts to the current restrictive context but also plants the seeds for future political party development. This approach necessitates a clear communication of the potential long-term impacts to global stakeholders, highlighting how supporting CSOs in political party programs can be a strategic investment in the resilience and diversity of future political landscapes. It is about making the case that this strategy, while unconventional, is a vital component of sustaining and expanding democratic engagement in challenging environments.

6.7. Work With Marginalized Groups: In closed or closing political environments, where traditional opposition parties face substantial operational constraints—not just in their formal activities or campaigns but also in grassroots organizing at the local level—interviewees have indicated that identifiable opposition parties often become prime targets for government surveillance and restriction. However, youth, women, and

marginalized populations **that are not part of the leadership sometimes** enjoy relatively more freedom to engage in political activities due to their previous marginalization from mainstream party power structures. This positions them outside the usual scrutiny, leading to fewer restrictions, less monitoring, and potential anonymity from authorities. **On the contrary women that are leaders of opposition parties in a closing space context are facing extra intensive oppression, violence, and sexual harassment.**

This relative anonymity **for groups outside of the immediate power circles** empowers them to participate actively in training, lead Training of Trainers (ToT) programs, organize community activities, and disseminate party messages or policies in ways that established party members might find challenging. Thus, the focus on developing and reaching out to these groups has shifted from being a supplementary aspect of NDI's programs to becoming a central strategy in political development efforts.

Moreover, the emphasis on youth, women's, and marginalized populations has grown increasingly significant within the realm of political party programs. NDI has a history of outreach to these groups, incorporating them into political party development initiatives, and facilitating the creation or enhancement of party wings or offices to support their involvement. Recognizing their critical role in expanding the party base and fostering growth, engagement with these demographics is now viewed as a principal strategy for party development in restrictive settings. This adaptation reflects the urgent necessity to explore all possible avenues for party functionality and development, highlighting these engagements as not merely opportunities for growth but sometimes as the only viable options for maintaining party activities and expanding their reach under challenging circumstances.

From a do-no-harm perspective, the vulnerability of these groups, particularly youth (also including young men), to oppression cannot be overlooked. There might be a need for a more nuanced discussion on tailoring support to mitigate risks, ensuring that programs are designed with the safety and well-being of these more vulnerable participants in mind.

To minimize their exposure to harm or pressure, careful consideration is vital to ensure that while fostering political engagement among youth, women, and other marginalized populations. This practice aligns with the overarching goal of promoting democracy without exacerbating the risks faced by these individuals in closed or closing spaces.

6.8. Engage With Non-Traditional Groups: In response to political repression and closed or closing political space, many less formal movements or non-affiliated groups have developed - some in response to protests or uprisings and others as a result of responding to community needs. In all regions in which NDI works, many of the newer potential politicians are coming up through protest or activist movements and thus are not part of traditional party structures. As newly formed party movements develop and informal political messages spread among populations and gain support, providing skills to unaffiliated people generally interested in political engagement, rather than formally through parties, is an important part of ensuring political literacy, the ability to get involved, and the ability of parties to survive in closed or closing spaces.

The emergence of newly-formed parties and movements represents a pivotal dynamic across diverse political landscapes, including those that are closing or have already closed. NDI's ongoing development of case studies and research into these entities underscores their growing importance. Sometimes, it is the youth, women, and marginalized populations at the forefront of these movements, catalyzed into action by their exclusion from traditional party structures. This trend presents both challenges and opportunities for NDI programs, necessitating a strategic shift to effectively engage with these emergent groups. The challenge lies in building meaningful relationships in the absence of traditional organizational and decision-making frameworks, which are frequently undetectable or entirely missing in such contexts.

Navigating these challenges to get involved in closed and closing spaces requires innovative approaches. NDI has had to adapt by seeking out new methods to connect with these movements, acknowledging the unique hurdles they face. This includes recognizing the unconventional ways these groups organize, communicate, and advocate for change. In response, NDI strives to tailor its support, offering resources and training that align with the specific needs and operational realities of these nascent entities. Such adaptation is crucial for fostering democratic principles and supporting the development of parties and movements that can thrive, even in the most restrictive environments.

6.9. Utilize Digital Technologies, Do Not Forget Traditional Communications: Though digital and online tools are important for party success, traditional methods are still critical. Many parties assumed, with the ascension of social media and other online communication methods and the prevalence of mobile devices, that effective communication and messaging would become much more efficient, cheaper, and easier. Some also assumed that remote communication and messaging could take the place of in-person or direct activism and organizing.

However, that has proven not to be the case, for a variety of reasons. Though technology was proven to be essential in the midst of the pandemic, programs still need to plan for the reality of working with partners in-person and finding ways to engage people in non-virtual activities, whether for specific events such as election campaigns or for more regular outreach and communication. This extends to the type of training activities and resources many parties are requesting; while digital skills are part of their identified needs, parties still identify traditional methods as well.

As youth populations grow in size and political engagement, NDI is working with people with a high level of digital skills. As traditional party members age and more youth come into parties, positions of influence, or higher levels of engagement with youth wings and community activism and advocacy efforts, these so-called "digital natives" have less need for basic digital skills building activities. They are working from a high level of digital literacy and comfort with a variety of social media platforms, devices, and methods for using electronic media in creative ways.

While digital skills training is undoubtedly essential, its effectiveness hinges on the ability to tailor the program to both the audience and the specific context in which they operate. This necessitates a nuanced analysis of the local environment and the unique challenges and

opportunities it presents. Training should be designed at a sufficiently advanced level to ensure practical application and relevance to the participants' needs. However, it's also crucial to recognize that the same audience, often digital natives, might lack proficiency in traditional outreach and political communication methods. This includes organizing in-person campaign or party activities and executing efforts like door-to-door canvassing or Get Out the Vote campaigns. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that balances digital literacy with traditional political engagement skills, all while being deeply contextualized, is essential for the holistic development of political actors in these environments.

NDI operates in environments where infrastructure challenges often make traditional party work not just more practical, but also crucial for safety reasons, especially in closed or closing spaces. In contexts where governments may resort to measures like phone tapping, reliance on digital communication like phone banking and SMS may not always be advisable. In countries where the government is known to monitor digital communications, alternative strategies need to be considered to ensure the safety and security of political actors.

Adjustments are necessary to adapt to the realities of poor or unreliable internet and online infrastructure, populations that predominantly access information through traditional media like radio and TV, and areas where advanced devices are scarce. Given these constraints, "old school" methods, while sometimes effective, must be evaluated against the risk of government surveillance and the potential harm to participants.

Thus, parties and political movements must be adept in both digital and traditional outreach methods, ready to pivot based on the context's demands and the security landscape. This dual capability allows for a flexible approach to engagement—balancing in-person and remote communication methods and extending outreach to individuals less familiar or comfortable with digital platforms. In doing so, it is crucial to continuously assess the risks associated with each communication method and tailor strategies that prioritize the safety of all involved while navigating the complexities of operating in closed or closing spaces.

Just as the overall political environment may be growing more restrictive, governments are also putting increasing restrictions on technology and online access. Many governments are putting control mechanisms on internet, mobile, and traditional media access as a means of controlling opposition political voices and controlling all forms of media and messages that reach the population. Methods used include: internet gateways to restrict access; a prohibition against certain sites or against certain people or organizations being allowed access to specific platforms; registration requirements for online sites, internet access, and mobile tools that force activists and party members to give up identifying information and make themselves known to the government; and laws restricting anyone other than government officials or sanctioned organizations to display or share political information.

In closed and closing spaces, the challenge of engaging in political development work transcends infrastructure limitations. Even in areas with robust infrastructure, high mobile penetration, and widespread internet access, the environment for digital engagement can be highly restrictive and limiting due to governmental surveillance and censorship. This

reality necessitates a strategic pivot in how NDI and its partners share information and connect with the population.

Specifically, in these restrictive environments, it becomes imperative to explore and implement alternative means of communication and engagement. Despite the digital age offering a plethora of tools for outreach, the risk of government monitoring of digital channels compels a return to more traditional methods of engagement. This includes in-person meetings, community gatherings, and the use of traditional media outlets like radio and print, which may offer safer avenues for disseminating information and mobilizing support.

NDI's approach in such contexts involves working closely with partners to develop and utilize these alternative strategies effectively. This might involve organizing small, discreet community meetings, utilizing local radio broadcasts to spread messages, or distributing printed materials in areas where such practices are less likely to attract undue attention. The goal is to maintain a line of communication with the population and continue the work of political development, all while navigating the constraints imposed by a repressive political landscape.

Adapting to these circumstances requires a deep understanding of the local context, including an assessment of the risks associated with various forms of communication and engagement. By prioritizing the safety of activists and the communities they serve, NDI and its partners can continue to support democratic development, even under the most challenging conditions.

6.10. Encourage Creativity and Flexibility: Parties need to be creative and flexible, employing a wide variety of tools, to be able to operate effectively in response to shifting restrictions and limitations. Many repressive regimes either have official or unofficial control over traditional media as well as online access, with ownership of media outlets such as radio and TV stations or control over what messages are allowed to be shared over media. As explained more below, the media landscape has become increasingly important as an element of controlling political power. This, in combination with the challenges related to online access and digital tools, requires that NDI work with parties to be broad-based in their approaches, realistically assess the environment in which they are operating and the tools to which they have access, and to develop a comprehensive set of skills within the party and among its members/staff so as to be able to react to new conditions, restrictions, and opportunities as they arise.

- Foreign examples do not automatically resonate, but **having diverse and numerous relationships is key.** One element of NDI's program success has been the ability to draw experts and resources from a variety of different political systems and contexts, sharing expertise with partners that relates directly to the situation they are facing or from which they can draw useful examples and techniques.

This has often been combined with tools such as study missions and exchanges that allow participants to experience similar or model political systems first-hand and share information with peers. While such expertise and tools are still important parts of a

successful NDI program, program staff are also noting that partners are increasingly sensitive to issues of language, common history, and local influence that mean that international examples do not directly or automatically serve as the most useful example. However, partners still value and utilize NDI's global network as a means to form relationships and expand their networks of peers.

Many countries see their situations as unique and so sometimes do not necessarily want to use examples from foreign countries. However, looked at from the outside and with some level of distance - either a period of time or from a varied perspective - certain examples might seem obvious as a model for another country to learn from. NDI staff do encounter resistance in some cases wherein participants do not want to be compared to or learn from other countries' protest or activist movements or democratic transitions. NDI staff should encourage participants to learn from other countries, as in some cases participants are surprised to learn that other countries have had similar experiences in the past.

If foreign examples are requested, sometimes regional examples tend to work best. This is for several reasons, including: common languages, in some cases; common history and challenges; familiarity and existing relationships with neighboring countries; and similarity of systems and resources. In other cases, however, specific contexts from a global perspective are better examples. If this is the case, it may be necessary to translate materials or hire interpretation in order to allow the country to feel comfortable asking questions and having deep and meaningful conversations to learn.

Many partners might recognize that countries like the US, Canada, and EU countries may have well developed political systems and consultants or trainers with high levels of expertise. Sometimes, they respond well to experts and resources that share their language, understand their history and can contextualize the information being shared, and are familiar with the type of resources and conditions in which they are operating. While NDI already has an extensive collection of resources in local languages and works with trainers and consultants who speak the language of the country in which they are asked to work, it should remain a priority as additional resources are developed and new trainers and consultants are recruited.

6.11. Navigate Power Dynamics: Navigating the delicate balance between fostering relationships for operational effectiveness and not inadvertently supporting the mechanisms contributing to the closure of democratic spaces poses a significant challenge, particularly in closed or closing environments. This dilemma is a critical aspect of NDI's work, where engaging with government officials, governing parties, and bureaucracies is essential for program implementation, yet there is a risk these actors might be involved in promoting restrictive policies.

In such contexts, NDI must carefully assess the implications of its engagement strategies to ensure that its efforts to build and maintain relationships do not compromise its commitment to promoting democracy. This involves a nuanced approach where dialogue and engagement are pursued with the clear objective of advancing democratic principles and practices.

Striking this balance requires transparent communication about NDI's multi-partisan and principled stance, emphasizing respect for local conditions while steadfastly advocating for democratic values. By doing so, NDI can maintain the integrity of its mission, fostering relationships that facilitate its work without endorsing or legitimizing actions that constrain political freedoms.

Moreover, it is essential for NDI to continuously evaluate these relationships within the broader context of each country's political landscape, adapting its approach as necessary. This might include leveraging connections to advocate for more open political spaces, supporting civil society in dialogue initiatives, or strategically engaging with government entities to promote reforms that align with democratic norms.

Engagement with these actors, therefore, must be approached with a critical understanding of the potential impacts on the political environment. By prioritizing principles over convenience, NDI can navigate this fine line, using its relationships to push for change subtly but effectively, ensuring that its presence and actions contribute positively to the broader goal of expanding democratic spaces.

In places where that is not possible, or in situations when NDI has been expelled from a country or forbidden to operate there, NDI has been able to establish presences and relationships with governments and bureaucracies in third countries, making it possible to continue program work and ensure that the work can be conducted without threat to or excessive limitation from the host country. As some activists have had to flee their home countries or as NDI has had to move to third countries in order to conduct activities, its network of regional relationships and former partners in places such as the Baltic countries, the Balkans, the EU, and in the Latin America and Caribbean region have been critical.

6.12. Leverage International Relationships: International relationships have also proven beneficial in establishing NDI as a critical bridge for partners forming connections with parties internationally. While partners value the expertise and information resources that NDI shares, they also value the connections that NDI can help them make with international and European party groups, with like-minded parties in their region or more broadly, and with peers currently holding office or running campaigns with their parties.

6.13. *Focus on Risk Management and Mitigation:* Risk management and mitigation have become central to the strategic planning and execution of NDI's programs, particularly as many operate within the complex dynamics of closed or closing political spaces. These environments, characterized by oppressive regimes or influenced by regional powers with restrictive policies, present unique challenges and heightened risks for both participants and program staff, spanning both physical and digital threats.

Given these conditions, there is a pressing need for NDI to refine its approach to programmatic risk assessments, focusing specifically on the nuances of closed or closing spaces. This entails a comprehensive analysis of the political landscape, identifying potential hazards to program delivery and participant safety, and crafting strategies that prioritize security without compromising the effectiveness of democratic development efforts. Expanding on this critical element involves:

- Developing more granular risk assessment frameworks tailored to the specific challenges of operating in restrictive environments. This includes evaluating the legal, social, and political factors that could impact program activities and identifying measures to mitigate identified risks.
- Enhancing practical guidance for program staff, detailing how to navigate the operational constraints imposed by closed or closing contexts. This guidance should cover both programmatic aspects—such as what can realistically be achieved—and the practical aspects related to ensuring the safety and security of all involved.
- Incorporating adaptive program designs that allow for flexibility in response to changing conditions on the ground. Programs must be designed with the ability to pivot as necessary, whether in response to an escalation in repression or an unexpected opening of political space.
- Fostering partnerships with local organizations that have a deep understanding of the context and can provide valuable insights into safely conducting activities. These partnerships can also enhance the resilience of programs by leveraging local networks for support and intelligence.
- Building capacities for emergency response among program staff and participants, ensuring that everyone involved is prepared to handle potential crises effectively.

By placing a stronger emphasis on these aspects of risk management, NDI can provide more robust support to its programs, ensuring they not only navigate the challenges of closed or closing spaces but also contribute meaningfully to the advancement of democratic principles under the most difficult circumstances. This strategic focus on risk assessment and mitigation is essential for sustaining the organization's mission and protecting the integrity and safety of its vital work worldwide.

6.14. Safety First: The ability to implement the program depends on the willingness of groups to work with NDI. While this may seem self-evident, even well-established and long-term programs may be contending with shifting political landscapes that make association with NDI, and with democratic development and advocacy more broadly, more risky and less helpful for participants. This may require that programs find new ways to reach out to and engage with partners so as to help them understand how NDI operates and the measures it takes to mitigate and manage risk in countries where this has not previously been necessary.

In places where NDI is working remotely, this will require that NDI be able to establish relationships virtually or through trusted local partners, have ways to vet information sources, and be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of its online security and its ability to train and convey information and expertise through a variety of methods. Sharing examples among NDI programs of how this has been done will be critical as a way to prove NDI's bona fides in such practices and to serve as de facto references for potential partners. While many programs operating under oppressive restrictions and in remote locations do not want to share specific examples or be cited directly, it is still important to find ways to make connections between program staff so that useful examples and contacts can be shared.

Programs in some countries have to take extreme measures in order to operate safely; creativity and flexibility are key to maintaining safety. NDI has been barred from operating in some countries, which puts its program partners at risk if they are known to be receiving NDI assistance. Though this is a danger for partners and participants, it is also a danger for NDI staff, regardless of location, and could result in repercussions for other NDI programs.

To mitigate these risks, some programs have resorted to measures which seem to be contrary to NDI and its funders' missions but are necessary in order to continue program activities. These measures include: not operating under NDI name but operating under a partner's name or some sort of third party entity in order to maintain anonymity; not using NDI email addresses or in any way linking to NDI as an organization, including stripping all NDI and funders' logos and acknowledgements from materials, not referencing NDI's website, and reducing any way to trace staff back to NDI employment; using encrypted communications channels and applications that do not allow messages to be decoded or traced; and establishing working partnerships with organizations in third countries that can host training activities, send communications, or act as trusted, unofficial NDI representatives.

While these measures are extreme, they are necessary in some cases given the levels of repression seen in some countries and given the cybersecurity risks inherent in online communications. This is a particular risk in countries influenced by Russia and China, who use extensive hacking and surveillance practices to restrict communications, intimidate opposition, and identify activists and party members.

Protocols need to be updated constantly and communicated and monitored carefully. Even with the best intentions, no system is foolproof. Working under the restrictions and dangers present in some closed or closing spaces requires regular management of risk and updating of security protocols, including what is communicated to and required of participants. It may require measures such as disallowing mobile phones and devices in training areas or organization offices; restricting note-taking or audio recordings during training sessions and destroying any written materials after activities are concluded; and limiting the number of participants and NDI staff taking part in programs.

6.15. Promote Safe Information Sharing: With the prevalence of methods to share information online and the speed with which such information can spread, it is incumbent upon program staff to ensure that participants understand what is and is not allowed so that things like YouTube videos, Tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram photos, and other social media information sharing are limited to only what has been determined by NDI to be safe.

The media ecosphere is a key determinant of political access and freedom in many countries. The presence of multiple media outlets in a country is not necessarily a sign of balanced or representative information being shared. In many countries, media access is limited - by law or by access - to government controlled or sanctioned outlets and messages. In some cases, this extends to newspapers, radio, and TV, while in others the internet is also a closed space for opposition media and messages, with some sites censored or banned and some people prevented from creating online platforms. Control of media can take the form of ownership or laws that limit the type of information being shared, the ability of some

people to even post online, censorship of messages posted online, and the posting of physical media such as posters or photos in public places.

Information and media is possibly the single most important commodity for parties to build and maintain success and influence. As seen in many countries, media drives the political messages and what people choose to consume determines who they support and what they understand of the political environment, the choices they have, and what is possible. So whoever or whatever entity controls the media has great amounts of power, influence, and control. In such environments, it is becoming increasingly difficult for opposition parties to gain attention and share information, necessitating some of the traditional approaches discussed above.

There is also the danger of "passive media" that infiltrates all information conduits with political messages. Such passive media is used in advertisements or commentary during non-political events such as sports matches or cultural events, wherein announcers are allowed to discuss or criticize political opponents, praise the government, or share a government-sanctioned message with the audience, even when it is not related to the program being shown. In some cases, it extends to the type of books that are published and the curricula allowed in schools, effectively giving government control over what people are allowed to learn and how those messages are delivered. In environments with such pervasive levels of information control, opposition parties, advocacy organizations, and individual activists must find different ways to share information and connect with potential supporters that will not alert government censors or provoke a crackdown.

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