

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN A DEMOCRACY

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I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this distinguished group. To give you a sense of my perspective on these issues, I would like to note that I work for the National Democratic Institute, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that has been working for 16 years to promote democracy around the world. To date, NDI has worked in more than 80 countries. NDI has had the privilege of collaborating with democratic activists and political leaders in most of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. NDI has also been pleased to draw many advisors for its activities from the Hemisphere.

I would like to take this opportunity to raise an issue that was touched upon at the Santiago Summit and offer a few ideas as preparations are made for the next summit in Quebec City. The topic I would like to address is the role of civil society and political parties in democratic development.

The Santiago Summit acknowledged the important role that civil society plays in a democracy. NDI and other members of the international community have provided well-deserved support for civil society. I am pleased to say that working with civil society groups has been a cornerstone of NDI's activities.

At the same time, the international community - including NDI - overlooked political parties and focused on the efforts of civil society groups. This occurred, in part, because there did not seem to be a need to support political parties. Latin American and Caribbean countries have a tradition of being home to some of the oldest and most sophisticated political parties in the world -- parties that helped bring about the wave of democracy that swept the region.

But whatever the strengths or shortcomings of political parties, they play a unique role in democratic systems. In fact, I know of no modern, healthy democracy without political parties. As you know, political parties play several critical roles: parties help aggregate interests in diverse societies; parties help develop compromise and consensus on national policies and legislation; and parties literally help form governments and legislatures.

Since the Santiago Summit, however, there has not been a lot of good

contributing, in part, to what some scholars call the "crisis of representation."

In some respects, some parties have brought this problem on by: failing to modernize and offer a clear political vision; neglecting to address ethics issues and closed decision making structures; and excluding sectors of society including women, youth and the indigenous community.

Whatever the reason, the problems confronting parties have an impact on democratic systems as a whole. The lack of effective parties can leave a political void that can be filled by populist demagogues. A dysfunctional party system can also lead to calls for direct democracy that cuts out middle institutions such as parliaments, which serve as foundation for representative government.

With these ideas in mind, I'd like to offer six recommendations as we look back at the Santiago Summit and forward to the events in Quebec City.

First, we should remind ourselves of the role that political parties and movements play in a democracy. And because of this key role, the fate of political parties and movements will determine prospects for democracy as a whole.

Second, it is important to underscore that support for political parties and civil society is not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is critical to work with both sectors in tandem. Civil society groups help to organize and articulate various interests in a society. In essence, civil society helps provide part of the "demand side" in politics. At the same time, political parties provide the "supply side." That is, parties help turn citizen interests and demands into policies and laws. If civil society groups lobby for change, it is critical that political parties are able to respond. If parties cannot help meet these demands then there is a danger that citizens will become frustrated and reject democracy as a political system.

Third, I recommend engaging political parties as a partner in democratic development and not just as a target of civil society programs.

Fourth, I would urge the international community to help political parties to modernize. This support should go beyond campaign techniques and include a focus on democratic values and decision-making. In this regard, I would like to commend the work of the OAS' Unit for the Promotion of Democracy.

Fifth, I recommend that the international community continue to address issues that undermine confidence in political parties, such as the issue of campaign financing, which was raised at the Santiago Summit. This is an issue with which the United States continues to grapple.

Finally, I would encourage the OAS to include discussion of the state of political parties on the agenda for the next summit. I believe this would be a good step toward shoring up political parties, which serve as a pillar of democratic systems. Thank you.

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