

Political Parties: Catalysts Or Obstacles to Democratic Reform?

A panel discussion on the occasion of the
World Forum on Democracy
Warsaw, Poland

Introductory Remarks
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June 25, 2000

Thank you all for coming and welcome to this afternoon's discussion of the role of political parties in the development of democracy. In the course of the next 90 minutes, we will endeavor to resolve, once and for all, whether political parties are in fact catalysts or obstacles to democratic reform.

I am very pleased to be joined by four quite distinguished political leaders who represent not only important political parties in their own countries, but also are joining us today on behalf of the three largest groupings of democratic political parties in the world – the Socialist International, the Christian Democratic International, and the Liberal International – who together include more than 320 parties in more than 70 countries.

- **Maria Soledad Alvea Valenzuela** is Minister of Foreign Affairs of Chile. In the previous government, she served as the Minister of Justice from 1994 to 1999. She is joining us today, however, in her capacity as a Christian Democrat activist and leader.
- **Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroek** is Minister of Finance, Budget and External Relations in Belgium, as well as President of the Liberal International. In 1981, Ms. Neyts-Uyttebroek was elected a Member of Parliament and was Secretary of State for Brussels until 1985. She served as the President of the Flemish Liberal Party from 1985 until 1989 and was a Member of the European Parliament from 1994 to 1999.
- **José Conde Rodrigues** is Vice President of the Socialist International's Committee on Administration and Finance. He served as the Mayor of Cantaxo, Portugal from January 1994 to May 2000. He joins us today as the personal representative of Antonio Manuel de Oliveira Guterres, Prime Minister of Portugal and President of the Socialist International.
- **Mary Harney** is Leader of the Progressive Democrats, a Liberal party, and the Deputy Prime Minister in the current Irish government. Elected to the *Dail Eirean* in 1977, she was a founder of the Progressive Democrats in 1979, and became party leader in 1993. From 1989 to 1991 she was the Deputy Leader and Spokesperson on Justice, Equality and Law reform of the Progressive Democrats.

The fact that these leaders come together for this discussion today, notwithstanding their many political and policy differences, is quite significant. It reflects a shared appreciation for the role that parties can play, as well as a shared acknowledgement that in too many countries political parties are not now fulfilling their promises or living up to their potential

At the National Democratic Institute, we have long-standing and strong ties to all three of these political families. Each has adopted us and welcomed us in their homes. Indeed, NDI is the only organization in the world to enjoy official standing in each of these organizations, and we have cooperated on training efforts for new, or newly liberated parties in numerous emerging democracies. And we can point to some successes in strengthening political parties, whether in Bosnia or Croatia, Mozambique or Malawi. And yet it has not been enough.

One does not need to look very far in the world to see parties that are underdeveloped, unconstructive or undemocratic. Parties may well be the weak link in many democracies and it is up to those who believe in the value of parties - who believe in the necessity of political parties in modern democracies - to take the initiative to strengthen this sector.

In countries that are in the news because of a political crisis – it is often the troubled state of political parties that lies at the heart of the issue. In *Zimbabwe*, the absence of effective political competition over the past 20 years meant that an inevitable and normal shift of voter sentiment has created a crisis atmosphere. Robert Mugabe’s long-governing ZANU-PF, unaccustomed to the normal give and take of democratic politics, has reacted with hysteria and deliberate violence. *Uganda* will hold a referendum on Thursday (June 29) to decide whether political parties may participate in elections there, after effectively being banned for more than two decades. Museveni has undertaken a beguiling and controversial attempt to do politics without political parties. If ever there is a place where parties have historically not acquitted themselves very well, it is Uganda. And yet, it still does not seem like a solution simply to ban parties - because the result looks very much like a one party system in which effective political competition is squelched.

A key tool in the suppression of political freedom in *China* today is to imprison anyone who tries to start a political party – or even, apparently, who gathers a crowd. Our anxieties about *Russia* under Vladimir Putin are in some significant way linked to the absence of strong and democratic parties there. Ten years after the demise of the Soviet Union it seems that Russia has produced political parties that are either strong or democratic, but not parties that are both strong and democratic.

Even in as settled a democratic environment as the European Union, one of its 15 member states – *Austria* – has been sanctioned by its fellow members for the inclusion in government of a political party best known to the world for the xenophobic, racist and undemocratic inclinations of its leader, Jorge Haider.

There are places in the world where political parties are banned and repressed and we are easily outraged and quick to speak about the need for to political party pluralism – China, Burma, Belarus and Cuba, for instance. But we often do not really know how to help the democrats in these places.

And then there are places where political parties have had their freedom and recently lost it and it is, honestly, hard to defend them. In Cote d’Ivoire, Pakistan, and Venezuela parties frittered away their credibility to the point where the overthrow of the established political order was, at least initially, genuinely popular. That ought to be red flag warning to all of us, underscoring the crisis in political parties, when a coup d’etat is seen by many as a solution to the undemocratic and unresponsive political parties.

So what is to be done? I would like to focus this very brief session by referring us to the paper you have before you: “Draft Declaration: Creating an International Partnership for Political Party Development.”

It reflects the contributions of a number of political party leaders, including members of our panel, and is intended as a basis for today's discussion. It is easy for political leaders to point at bad governments and restrictive laws that suppress political pluralism, at the international donors with money who do not support parties in emerging democracies, at indifferent voters who do not understand or will not participate. What can political parties themselves do – that is, what can *we* do - to strengthen political parties: politically and developmentally?

After all, it is not just due to misunderstanding and miscommunication that voters in most countries think of political parties as

- tolerant of corruption (if not active in it)
- self centered, inward-looking, exclusive and, therefore, unrepresentative
- ineffective in government
- unresponsive to voters' real interests and citizens' real needs for development

And this is as true in what we often refer to as 'established democracies,' as it is in new or potential democracies.

When we talk about parties' lack of access, responsiveness and inclusiveness, we often mean principally women or ethnic/linguistic/ religious minorities. In Central and Eastern Europe, the region in which we meet today, for instance, the Roma are universally discriminated against by their neighbors and often shunned by political parties professing a democratic inclination. Parties, I suggest, by definition cannot be characterized as democratic unless or until they welcome women and Roma at all levels.

My thesis, therefore, to which I invite reactions and corrections, is as follows.

1. Parties have been both catalysts and obstacles to democratic reform. Sometimes the same parties that play critical important roles in fostering change have thereafter become obstacles to further reform and to effective and responsive government.
2. In addition to their function as engines of ideas and policies for government, parties need to be cognizant of the fact that they are also models or demonstrations of democracy – (particularly in new democracies, but also in the longer established democracies where many parties are in trouble.) How parties behave – toward one another and in their internal organization – tells their fellow citizens how democracy works. If they are venal and self-serving, divisive and corrupt, intolerant and obstructionist – then they are telling their publics that that is how they believe democracy works. It is also the best evidence of how they will behave in government.

On the other hand, if parties are transparent and inclusive in their operations, respectful of women and ethnic or religious minorities, adhere to the rules established - in the selection of candidates and adoption of policies – then they are demonstrating another way that democracy can work – and providing evidence of how they will behave in government.

3. Even parties that are rivals in elections and in parliaments and that disagree on many issues of public policy need to realize that they will, to some significant extent, sink or swim together. If parties generally become discredited then voters will tend to turn away from all of them eventually – and this creates possibilities for military coups (Pakistan and Cote d’Ivoire last autumn) and strong man rule as in Venezuela and Peru today. Parties, like other social organizations, need constant rejuvenation to stay current, to stay flexible, to be responsive to their people and to the times.
4. The international community of democratic political parties ought, therefore, to engage in joint and coordinated political initiatives to oppose constraints on freedom of association for parties. *Uganda, Burma, Belarus, Cuba, China* all come to mind as places where the Socialist International, Liberal International and the Christian Democratic International could send joint missions or issue statements together.
5. The international community of democratic political parties, present here today in leading representatives of the Socialist International, Christian Democratic International and Liberal International ought to undertake greater developmental initiatives by devoting greater energy and resources to the strengthening of democratic political parties. One part of this might be to articulate norms or standards of democratic parties and to therefore provide practical assistance in achieving these standards. For example, the OECD has established ‘principles of corporate governance’ and trade unions affiliated with the ICFTU have settled on norms for what constitutes a democratic trade union. Could we not do as much for political parties?

So, you have before you, in the “Draft Declaration on Creating and International Partnership for Political Party Development” a proposed initiative that we would like to support. We hope that the distinguished leaders of the largest bodies of democratic political parties will take today’s discussion – and this draft – back to their respective governing bodies for deliberation and decisions.