Democracy Out of Balance

Civil Society Can't Replace Political Parties

By IVAN DOHERTY

MAX WEBER ONCE REFERRED to political parties as "the children of democracy," but in recent years civil society, in the new and emerging democracies, has often become the favored child of international efforts to assist democracy. Civil society has been described as the "wellspring of democracy," a romantic, if perhaps exaggerated, claim. The international community has promoted civic organizations, assisted them, and supported their expansion and development, often building on the ruins of discredited political parties. This has been a good and necessary endeavor. Yet the almost exclusive focus on civil society has moved beyond fashion. For some it has become an obsession, a mantra.

Increasingly, resources are being channeled to programs that develop civil society to the exclusion of political parties and political institutions such as parliaments. Many private and public donors feel that it is more virtuous to be a member of a civic organization than a party and that participating in party activity must wait until there is a certain level of societal development. There is a grave danger in such an approach. Strengthening civic organizations, which represent the demand side of the political equation, without providing commensurate assistance to the political organizations that must aggregate the interests of those very groups, ultimately damages the democratic equilibrium. The neglect of political parties, and parliaments, can

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undermine the very democratic process that development assistance seeks to enhance. Without strong political parties and political institutions that are accountable and effective, that can negotiate and articulate compromises to respond to conflicting demands, the door is effectively open to those populist leaders who will seek to bypass the institutions of government, especially any system of checks and balances, and the rule of law.

The civil society boom

In the 1980s and '90s, civil society became the fashionable focus of attention as the changing political landscape created new opportunities for civic groups in countries emerging from dictatorial regimes. This newfound infatuation with civil society can be attributed to a number of factors: the critical role played by civil society — before real political parties could legally operate — in leading the charge against totalitarian regimes in Asia and Eastern Europe; the early adverse reaction to political parties by citizens who had experienced single-party systems in many of these countries; and the reaction of those offering support from established democracies who were themselves disillusioned with party systems and were more comfortable placing their hopes in civil society as a means of political and social renewal.

Those who embrace the development of civil society as a means of apolitical involvement in the internal politics of a country fail to recognize the limitations of such an approach. In the first instance, civil society groups in new and emerging democracies constantly grapple with what are intrinsically political issues. For example, in the context of monitoring an electoral process or advocating for improved living standards, political parties remain the primary vehicle for political action and the enactment of laws; without engaging them in the process, there can only be limited advancement. Avoiding the issue of partisan politics in the rush to strengthen civil society runs the risk of undermining representative politics and failing to exploit the real avenues to political influence open to civil society.

Examples abound of countries with a strong and active civil society where the weakness or entrenchment of political parties serves to put the entire democratic system in jeopardy. In Bangladesh, despite an abundance of advocacy and citizen action groups, the recurring partisan political stalemate consigns the country and its citizens to abject poverty. Having moved from military dictatorship to popularly elected governments on a number of occasions over the past decade, it would appear that some political leaders have learned very little. Both of the main political forces in Bangladesh have contributed to the continuing political impasse. The influence wielded by many political leaders over supporters and citizens is constantly used for narrow partisan purposes, while civil society stands helplessly on the sidelines. Also, the tendency to promote divisions in civil society indicates recognition of the

real threat a united and independent civil society poses to those who wish to undermine the democratic system or subvert it. Without movement in the area of political party reform and the creation of a more open and transparent parliamentary system, the fate of democracy and the welfare of the Bangladeshi people will continue to be threatened.

In Morocco, thousands of NGOs and advocacy groups have been active for many years, but the gradual movement towards democratic politics came about as a result of changes to the constitution allowing the results of elections to be properly reflected in the formation of the government. Following an election in 1998, for the first time, political parties that received the majority of votes were invited to form a government. As a consequence, parties that were considered to be "anti-establishment" and had been in opposition for almost 50 years came to power, ushering in a new era that aspired to a more open and democratic political system. While civil society played a central role in bringing about these changes, it was the commitment of the parties and their leaders that gave them effect. The willingness of political leaders to play a constructive role when conditions were not ideal came at a critical juncture in Morocco's history. While Morocco is only in the early stages of a democratic transition and the outcome is not assured, the maturity displayed by political leaders during those initial first steps has laid an important foundation.

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Almost immediately, the political parties sought assistance from the international community in coping with their new political climate. They recognized the necessity of making parliament more democratic and the new government more responsive. Parties were inexperienced in building and maintaining real coalitions and in properly engaging civil society in the process of representative politics. Equally, there was an acknowledgement that these changes could and would remove parties from government just as it had given them a mandate. Through all of these developments, civil society played a critical role in raising the public awareness of the many remaining obstacles to greater participation in the democratic process. In fact, it demanded more inclusive and responsive representation. The willingness of the political parties to embrace reforms, with assistance from outside, served to create a more stable and healthy relationship between political leaders and civil society.

Northern Ireland is another example of a well-developed and financed civil society that failed to fill the vacuum created by deadlocked political forces. For decades, the province of Ulster was racked by internal conflict, its communities bitterly divided and the role of its elected politicians severely curtailed. Responsibility for providing many of the services normally provid-

ed by local government fell to NGOs and other community groups through committees often referred to as "quangos" — such bodies are formally classified as nondepartmental public bodies, or NDPBs. These bodies comprised nonelected officials and their power came from central government with little or no accountability to the citizens. They received public funding and carried out valuable work in communities across the province. While political leaders grappled with seemingly insurmountable sectarian divisions, and the rule of law gave way to violence and terrorism, progress could not be made until accommodations could be reached which recognized the diverse aspirations of both Nationalist and Unionist communities. These accommodations were achieved through negotiations between political leaders and with the support of civil society. There can be no doubt that the role of civil society was a critical element in reaching a consensus, but without the full engagement of the political parties no agreement would have been reached. The eventual agreement on self-government (Good Friday 1998) through a power-sharing arrangement was endorsed by almost 70 percent of the electorate in a referendum and included a role for civil society through the establishment of a "civic forum," which will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic, and cultural issues.

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In similar examples across the world — from Chile and the Philippines in the 1980s to Indonesia and Serbia in the '90s — the combined and complementary efforts of political parties and civil society have reclaimed democracy for many citizens. In almost all cases, it may prove easier and more comfortable for the international community to provide support and encouragement for civil society while engaging in only limited interaction with political parties. However, while any transition to democracy requires popular mobilization, so too does it require constitutional and institutional frameworks. The initial mobilization may be best orchestrated by civil society, but political parties are the only actors who can provide the required institutional framework.

It is not that political parties in fledgling democracies are completely bereft of international support. In the United States, the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, with support from the National Endowment for Democracy and the Agency for International Development, provide technical assistance and advice to democratic parties worldwide. Both institutes have also supported the development of civic organizations, particularly their engagement in the political process. Elsewhere, similar efforts have been undertaken by the publicly funded Westminster Foundation for Democracy in Great Britain and foundations affiliated with political parties in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. This support to parties, however, has been dwarfed by large-

scale resources provided to civic organizations and state institutions by donor aid agencies, international financial institutions, and private foundations. This imbalance in assistance has the unintended consequences of devaluing and marginalizing the foundations of representative democracy: political parties and the legislatures within which they operate. During times of crisis, a political vacuum can be created, inviting direct entreaties to the populace at large. Political parties are not perfect, but no other national institution can serve as well to impede the emergence of autocratic leaders or government by fiat.

Too often, technical assistance to political parties is available very late in the process and in such a meager form as to have little impact on long-term development. It often concentrates on campaign techniques, which are indeed always the most pressing challenge facing new and weak political parties. Fledgling parties continually struggle to mount effective campaigns and meet the expectations of a newly informed electorate. The greater challenge comes in the postelection period, when the consolidation of the political party system poses far greater challenges for party leaders. And here there is typically very little assistance or support from the international community. In the rush to hold elections, parties often fail to address institutional development issues until the electoral contests are over. Afterward, they may be forced to come to terms with a new political landscape requiring them to concentrate on building democratic institutions. At a critical stage in the early development and consolidation of the parties, the leaders and many key officials are drawn into the government and legislative process, thereby allowing their nascent parties to atrophy. Many parties are ill-prepared for the demands of both government and opposition, and are unable to adequately satisfy the expectations of citizens. This only exacerbates public cynicism.

Party failures

In emerging democracies worldwide, political parties are either too weak, too personalistic, too constrained by oppressive governments, or too corrupt and out of touch to earn the respect and support of the public. In Romania, for example, the former communists remained in government for a number of elections until a coalition of opposition parties from across the political spectrum came to power in 1996. The "reform" parties won in a landslide, taking control of both houses of parliament and winning the presidency. Through inexperience and poor interparty relations, the new government quickly became paralyzed, eroding its support base only to be replaced at the next election four years later. A similar scenario could be playing out in Slovakia now. From Russia to Venezuela and Peru to Pakistan, when countries experience political crisis, it is often the troubled state of political parties that lies at the heart of the problem.

Anxieties about the state of democracy in Russia are clearly linked to the absence of strong and democratic political parties. Ten years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has produced political parties that are either strong or democratic but, regrettably, not many parties that are both. As Michael McFaul has noted in his review of the six groups that won seats in the Duma in 1999, two are not parties and two are not democratic. The two that are arguably democratic political parties committed to liberal principles and the rule of law together won 14.5 percent of the vote and 49 of 450 seats in the legislature. Political parties in Russia are weak because powerful politicians have deliberately set out to make them so. President Yeltsin was opposed to political parties and saw no advantage in joining one when he left the Soviet Communist Party. Though he won two elections himself, he never sought to build an organization based on an enduring program and constituency. His successor, Vladimir Putin, is not a member of any party, though a group supporting him won 25 percent in the Duma elections. He is currently proposing legislation that will curtail the activities of political parties.

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Indonesia is also emerging from an authoritarian past into the unknown realms of a competitive multiparty system. Where a handful of compliant political parties had existed under the old regime, the new political order brought a myriad of parties of all shapes and sizes onto the political landscape. A total of 48 parties satisfied the new registration criteria, while a further 93 failed to qualify. Following the 1999 election, less than 15 political parties are represented in parliament, the largest with only 30 percent of the seats. In the postelection negotiations, Abdurrahman Wahid was elected president by parliament, even though his party held only 51 seats in the assembly, while the favorite, Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose party held 154 seats, was offered the vice presidency. The political situation in Indonesia is still unstable, with very few of the parties having succeeded in coming to terms with the new political climate, and all of them failing to adequately represent those who gave them support in the election. Democratization is at a very delicate stage in Indonesia, with much to be done in terms of strengthening the political parties. At the same time, it is imperative that citizens participate in the process and that parties become more representative of society and responsive to its needs.

There are also a number of countries where political parties have actually lost their mandate to function through their own mismanagement of the political system. In Pakistan, for example, political parties effectively frittered away their credibility to the point where the military's overthrow of the established political order, in October 1999, was accepted, if not wel-

comed. It certainly is a cause of grave concern and underscores the crisis in political parties when a coup d'etat is regarded by many as an acceptable solution to undemocratic and unresponsive political parties.

Venezuela provides another illustration of what happens in the absence of a credible party system. The current president tried (and failed) to take control of the country by force in 1992, but yet went on to establish himself as an acceptable alternative to a party system which had proven itself weak and ineffectual. He was elected president in 1999. Since the end of dictatorship in 1959, a two-party system representing Social Democrats and Christian Democrats had dominated politics in Venezuela. Both parties eventually lost touch with the electorate, showed scant regard for the poor and underprivileged, and failed to tackle increasing corruption in their ranks. They became discredited in the eyes of citizens, enabling Hugo Chavez to emerge from the political vacuum promoting an image of an honest military man above politics — a man willing to take radical action against a corrupt "establishment." Since his election, Chavez has moved to further centralize executive power in his hands by amending the constitution. In his defense of these measures, he argues that he is seeking to provide for "direct democracy" because of the failure of "representative democracy." Having dispensed with the traditional political parties, he has turned to the dismemberment of civil society, starting with the country's trade unions.

There are also many countries where political parties are banned and repressed, and while much has been made of the lack of political party pluralism, there are no simple answers as to how support can be offered to democrats in these countries. Any traces of political activity carry grave dangers for those involved in countries such as China, Burma, Belarus, and Cuba. In June 2000, Uganda held a referendum to decide whether political parties may participate in elections there, after effectively being banned for more than two decades. The referendum confirmed the so-called "no party" system. President Museveni has undertaken a controversial attempt to conduct politics without political parties, claiming that they ferment ethnic hostility and discord. Yet it does not seem like a solution simply to ban political parties — because the result looks very much like a one-party system in which most effective political competition is squelched.

Working together

THE GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC revolution of the past decade has demonstrated that people regard democracy as a necessity and a right in and of itself, and not merely an aspiration to be balanced against or even overshadowed by other national or economic interests. Truly open and democratic systems of government are not a threat to individual or communal welfare, but rather provide the means by which a nation can attain its full potential, both economically and politically. Democracy

requires working democratic structures: legislatures that represent the citizenry and oversee the executive; elections in which voters actually choose their leaders; judiciaries steeped in the law and independent of outside influences; a system of checks and balances within society; and institutions and leaders that are accountable to the public.

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

Political parties form the cornerstone of democratic society and serve a function unlike any other institution in a democracy. In a 1998 article in the *Journal of Democracy*, "The Indispensability of Political Parties," Seymour Martin Lipset writes that "a democracy in a complex society may be defined as a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office — that is, through political parties." The role of a political party is to aggregate and then represent social interests, providing a structure for political participation. They act as a training ground for political leaders who will eventually assume a role in governing society. In addition, parties contest and seek to win elections in order to manage government institutions.

Political parties nominate candidates, organize political competition, unify portions of the electorate, and translate policy preferences into public policies. When out of power, they provide a constructive and critical opposition by presenting themselves as the alternative government voters may wish to choose — thus pressuring the incumbents to be more responsive to the public's interests. Organized political parties serve two fundamental purposes. First, they define and express a group's needs in a way that the public and political system can understand and respond to. Second, they develop common ideas among a significant group in order to exert pressure upon the political system. Principled differences of opinion — and the tolerance of diversity and dissent that this implies — are an important part of the democratic process. The expression of conflicting viewpoints can actually help to create a better understanding of the issues and to identify solutions. When the political system functions, these exchanges lead to the attainment of new insights or workable compromises essential to the existence of a democratic system. In short, they produce tangible results.

For its part, civil society also constitutes an integral component of a dem-

ocratic system. Democracy cannot endure unless it is underpinned by a strong civic culture and supported by a populace that is committed to such ideals as the rule of law, individual liberty, freedom of religion, free and open debate, majority rule and the protection of minorities. A dynamic civil society fosters many elements essential for democracy: participation, accountability, and sustainable political reform, to name but a few. An organized civil society gives a voice to the underprivileged (as well as the privileged) and amplifies their influence in the political process. Nongovernmental organizations play a critical role in developed and developing countries. They contribute to the shaping of policy by making technical expertise available to policy formulators and by exerting pressure on governments and political institutions. They encourage citizen participation and promote civic education. They provide leadership training and opportunities for the young and the marginalized and act as a vehicle for their participation in civic life when working through political parties may not be the best option.

Much of the momentum for real and lasting reform of political systems is often found outside of government, but no one sector can claim the monopoly in this area. Governments, political parties and civil society must work together to deliver on political and democratic reform. Civil society is not and can never be a substitute for political parties or for responsible, progressive political leadership. It should never be a case of civil society *instead of* political parties, but rather civil society as a necessary complement to parties. The idea of choosing between civil society groups and political parties is a false one. Political parties and civil society are natural allies. Political parties can do much more than any other sector (including government) to further incorporate civil society into politics, so it is important (both for the quality of democracy and for their own political vitality) that parties encourage outreach activities. Civic groups should not become an arm of any particular party, as this would undermine their autonomy, but partnerships on issues of common interest can be developed. Where parties reach out and engage civic groups and cooperate with them on specific issues and reforms, parties will become stronger institutionally and will be held in higher esteem by citizens. While a healthy tension will always exist between both forces, this tension should be accompanied by a mutual respect of the vital roles played by each other.

The politics of democracy

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

Ivan Doherty

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

Leaders worldwide must rededicate themselves to the renewal of political parties and political party systems.

A new approach is required, one in which political leaders worldwide rededicate themselves to the renewal and reform of political parties and political party systems. International democracy assistance organizations must support these efforts and make much needed resources available in the form of technical assistance and expertise. Recently, the three largest international groupings of political parties — representing Social Democratic, Liberal, and Christian Democratic ideologies — are joining forces to promote political party development. With a combined membership of 350 parties in more than 140 countries, these "political internationals" can develop standards to assist the efforts of parties to reform their structures and operations.

The democratization of political parties must be a priority in the efforts to restore public confidence in parties and the democratic process as a whole. Greater citizen participation, accountability of leadership, transparency, and institutional safeguards are more important now than ever for this democratization effort to succeed. Organizations and institutions that have the commitment and expertise to underpin and promote these initiatives lack adequate resources to do so at present. Equally, the modest efforts currently being undertaken can be undermined by a lack of support from those international organizations engaged in the global democratization effort. This support is not just a matter of financial resources, but also of keener recognition of the critical role of political parties and their leaders. For example, the international financial institutions and aid agencies often promote and finance important dialogue between governments and civil society organizations on key national and local development issues. Party representatives and lawmakers should be included in this effort.

Civil society is not to blame for the decline in political parties, and neither are those who promote increased support for citizen participation outside of the party system. On the other hand, one should not take any comfort from the current crisis, as the decline of political parties ultimately threatens the foundations of democracy.

For decades, it was believed that economic development aid by donor countries could achieve the kind of economic growth and opportunity that would lead to social stability in the developing world. But even when successful, the emphasis on *economic* growth often lost momentum because it was not accompanied by *political* growth. It became increasingly apparent that an ever-growing number of problems in the developing world were beyond the reach of traditional economic aid. While they have economic consequences, the problems are not predominately economic in nature — they are intrinsically political. Truly, so-called sustainable development requires the capacity to resolve problems without resorting to violence or repression.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a sea change of attitudes by the donor community and international financial institutions that came to recognize that democratic political systems and free-market economies are two parts of the same process, sustaining each other. Where guarantees of individual rights within society do not exist, the inevitable result is exploitation, corruption, stratification, disorder, and the inability to compete — particularly in a more democratic and competitive world. In fact, rural dislocation, environmental degradation, and defective agricultural policies that lead to famine and strife all trace to political systems in which the victims have no voice, in which government institutions feel no obligation to answer to the people, and in which special interests feel free to exploit resources without fear of oversight or the need to account.

There must now be a call to action by the community of democracies to put political party development internationally on an equal footing with programs that nurture civil society. This endeavor will reinforce the values we share and serve our strategic interests. After all, a more democratic world is a more humane, peaceful, stable, and prosperous place.