

**“Inter-American Political Parties Forum:
Recommendations for Follow-on Activities”
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National Democratic Institute for International Affairs
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On behalf of the National Democratic Institute, I would like to thank the OAS for the opportunity to address this important committee. As you may know, NDI is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that has worked to promote and expand democracy in more than 90 countries since 1984.

NDI was pleased to have worked closely with the OAS’ Unit for the Promotion of Democracy in responding to the mandate of the Quebec City Summit to address the issue of political parties. I want to commend the OAS for recognizing the importance of political parties in a democracy, institutions that have long been overlooked by the international community.

Political parties play a unique and indispensable role in a democracy – representing citizens, forging political consensus and forming governments. I know of no modern democracy that has functioned well without healthy political parties. In this sense, the state of political parties in a given country determines the fate of its democracy as a whole.

To its credit, the OAS is a pioneer among inter-governmental organizations in formally recognizing this fundamental point. This is not the only issue in which the OAS has assumed a leadership role. The Santiago Declaration and the Caracas accord on anti-corruption have been models for other inter-governmental groups.

At this point, the challenge facing the OAS is how to give concrete expression to this commitment. The December 2001 Inter-American Political Parties Forum organized by the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy was an important inaugural event. As the OAS moves to the next steps, I would like to offer five points that the OAS may wish to consider.

First, the OAS should also be prepared to offer parties what is known in the parlance of self-help theorists as “tough love.” In the same sense that the OAS is reaching out to parties, it will also be important to underscore that modernization and renewal of parties is not an easy task. The temptation to take the easy route of attempting to remedy the deep-rooted challenges with image consultants and superficial changes must be avoided. The task is to bring political parties along as partners but realize they are also the object of reform efforts. This is a delicate balance.

Second, efforts to build on the success of the Inter-American Forum in Miami should start by consolidating the “buy-in” of political parties. Developing this

commitment could start with the formation of a small advisory committee that includes political practitioners who represent the ideological spectrum of democratic political parties. It will not be necessary to include all parties from a given country. Rather the OAS should seek to ensure that the committee has ideological balance. This committee would help guarantee that parties are committed and that the initiatives that are organized respond to their needs.

Third, the advisory committee should also embrace diversity. The body should include women and young reform-minded emerging leaders in addition to often-neglected ethnic minorities. The OAS may also wish to consider forming an adjunct committee with the co-sponsoring organizations of the Miami summit, and perhaps representatives of the regional groupings of the political party internationals to assist the advisory council.

Fourth, this advisory committee will be critical in helping the OAS design follow-on activities that are practical so that political parties will want to take part. Academic studies and speeches on the challenges facing parties are not in short supply. The task at hand is to provide parties with concrete help in renewal and modernization. The OAS may wish to examine the lessons learned by the handful of organizations that have worked to strengthen political parties in recent decades. For its part, NDI is in its fourth year of its regional Political Party Leadership Program, which has promoted reform and renewal among emerging leaders of 28 parties in eight countries in the hemisphere.

Finally, in its statement on the Miami summit, the OAS has eloquently framed the issue of renewal and modernization of parties and provided a useful framework of *what* is to be done. Once an advisory committee is established, the next issue will be the mechanics -- that is, to determine *how* and by *whom* potential programs should be implemented. In this regard, the OAS has a number of options. NDI would recommend that the OAS select the approach that best suits the specific nature of the follow-on activities.

One option is for the OAS is to implement activities directly. In this regard, the OAS' international stature is a great advantage as evidenced by its convening power in Miami and its success in putting issues on the international community's agenda. By the same token, as an inter-governmental body, the natural counterparts of the OAS are the governments of its member states. In certain types of party work, this relationship may be awkward when activities include parties in opposition to sitting governments.

Another option, which I mention at the risk of sounding self-serving, is for the OAS to explore working through non-governmental organizations with experience in political party development. This approach has been adopted by governments in Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and the U.S. as well as by other inter-governmental organizations.

Again, NDI is grateful for the opportunity to address the committee. We look forward to continuing to work with the OAS on this timely and important initiative.