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Political Parties in Developing and Developed Countries

I would first like to thank the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the China Reform Forum for giving me an opportunity to address such a distinguished gathering about the role of political parties in democratic systems.

I have been asked to speak today about the decline of political parties in both developed and developing democracies. At the outset, I would like to say that I approach this topic from a number of different perspectives – as president of an organization working to strengthen political parties and political institutions worldwide, and also as a close observer of the domestic political situation in the United States. I am aware of the glaring deficiencies in the way many political parties, both at home and abroad, have operated and their newfound efforts to better represent the views of ordinary citizens and respond to their concerns, hopes and aspirations.

While it is widely recognized that political parties are facing a deepening crisis worldwide, parties continue to play an irreplaceable role in democratic systems. The

weaknesses of political parties must be addressed to allow parties to continue to promote avenues for increased citizen participation in the political process worldwide.

Crisis of Political Parties

Many political parties, both in established democracies and in nascent multi-party systems, are in a state of near crisis. Globally, citizens have grown increasingly frustrated with their political parties and leaders. Polls, focus groups and voting behavior indicate that society largely views political parties as ineffective, corrupt, and out of touch with their needs. Established political parties have experienced a dwindling membership that is aging. Young people are hesitating to join or become associated with political parties. At the same time, support has risen for independent candidates, special interest parties, and anti-party movements.

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. From Russia to Pakistan to Peru to Venezuela, and other countries experiencing political crisis, the troubled state of parties lies at the heart of their political problems. In Russia, anxieties about the state of democracy are clearly linked to the absence of strong, democratic political parties. Ten years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has produced political parties that are strong or democratic but, regrettably, not many parties that are both. 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 CPSU. 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 of the vote in the Duma elections. He quickly proposed legislation that would make it more difficult for parties to organize.

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 was accepted, if not welcomed, by the citizenry.

In Peru and Venezuela, the collapse of political parties that were viewed as corrupt and elitist, created a political vacuum that was quickly filled by populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies. These leaders rose from the ashes of discredited parties and they sought to further weaken their country's party system, including legislatures, as a means to maintain power.

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.

Centralized decision making, the lack of well-institutionalized rules and procedures, and the decline of ideology or unifying principles have eroded public support and discouraged participation in political party activities. 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 candidates over party structures.

In fact, one prominent Western consultant has gone so far as to argue that he is no longer dependent on a party structure to deliver targeted messages to different segments of the electorate. In his view, it is the candidate, the message and the medium (i.e. television), that matters more than party. "There is hardly a democracy that has been established for more that 20 years when a pollster like myself…could not come in and take a candidate with a powerful message, a constituency that wanted change, and completely turn that [political] structure on its head," he asserts. He sites the meteoric rise of Canada's Reform party along with the virtual demise of the Conservative Party in 1993, as well as the emergence of populist leaders like Chavez in Venezuela and Fujimori in Peru.

To be fair to political parties, however, this crisis of confidence may more accurately reflect a growing lack of trust in institutions more broadly. According to political analysts who have conducted extensive public opinion surveys globally, it is not only

parties that are in trouble. It is the institutions of democracy that face difficulties because of an underlying culture of mistrust. These surveys' confidence index of democratic institutions in Europe, Latin America and Africa show that religious bodies enjoy the greatest level of trust, followed by presidents. Armed forces rank third; courts of justice came in fourth; parliaments rank fifth with political parties in sixth place.

But what is most striking is that trust in people beyond the family and workplace comes in last place. " So how much can we trust institutions of democracy if we do not trust ourselves beyond our families?" asks respected Chilean pollster Marta Lagos who has conducted extensive cross-national public opinion surveys. This is not to say that people do not support democracy. They overwhelmingly do. However, the polls show a gap between support for democracy, satisfaction in the performance of democracy and trust in the institutions of democracy.

Parties rank at the bottom of these institutions because they have tended to act without transparency. Citizens do not know how parties make decisions; and having open rules, being accessible and accountable is the foundation upon which political trust is built.

The Central Role of Political Parties

I make these remarks at the outset, as I think it is important to acknowledge that all is not well with political parties and that parties themselves and their leaders must take a large share of the blame for the current situation.

With that acknowledgement of the well-documented problems with political parties, it is also true that parties are needed and cannot be replaced by civil society or by any other organized structure created to give representation to citizens.

Why? Because political parties have formed the cornerstone of democratic society and serve a function like no other institution. In a modern society, democracy cannot function without political parties. 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. The late Speaker of the U.S. Congress, Tip O'Neill once stated, "All politics are local," meaning that all issues of importance to the average citizen are felt on a local level. But only political parties play the crucial role of helping people place their local concerns in a national context. Parties mediate. They create common ground. By definition, their vision goes beyond the town limits. Political parties aggregate interests, especially in diverse and pluralizing societies. They create grounds for compromise. They create order out of chaos. And thus they help societies unite and remain united.

Civic organizations do indeed deal with political and governmental institutions. They represent and they mediate. Yet they are local and parochial, and since they are presented as the voice of the people, in the absence of permanent political institutions, they can invite direct entreaties to the populace at large.

This is especially true where governments are weak or underdeveloped or corrupt. Without parties and political institutions that transcend both time and place, the door is opened to someone who will ignore the institutions of government, especially any system of checks and balances and the respect for the rule of law. Needles to say, political parties are not perfect, but no other national institution can serve as well to impede government by fiat, government by mob, government by strongman.

Second, political parties develop common ideas among a significant group in order to exert pressure upon the political system. A principled difference of opinion — and the tolerance of diversity and dissent that this implies — is 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 can lead to the attainment of new insights or workable compromises essential to the existence of a democratic system. In short, they produce tangible results.

In addition to these fundamental purposes, political parties operate day-to-day to nominate candidates, organize political competition, translate policy preferences into public policies, act as a training ground for political leaders who will eventually assume a role in governing society, and seek to win elections in order to manage government institutions. 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.

In over two centuries there has been no democratic system without political parties. Parties have provided orientation for individuals and groups of citizens. Citizens may be divided over ideologies, interests, leaders or policies; parties can organize these differences. Parties link the institutions of government to the elements of civil society such as economic, ethnic, cultural, religious and other social groups. The types of linkages may vary greatly but they represent lines of response and control between a party and its constituency.

Attempts to build a democracy without political parties have failed in the past. Even a cursory study of the history of democracy in the US and France will underscore this point. Two examples of military leaders turned into national heroes during a fight for national independence or liberation and into leading politicians afterwards provide telling examples: Generals George Washington and Charles de Gaulle extremely disliked political parties. Nevertheless, each of them contributed towards the establishment of a new political system that led to a stable party-based democracy.

Because political parties are seen to be agents of power, or vehicles through which the most divisive elements of a society manifest themselves, it is often an ideal of people to be able to have a political system that can seemingly rise above politics. But it is clear that this state of affairs is impossible.

As a prominent US political scientist stated many years ago, "Political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties."

The Founding Fathers of the United States had the same dislike for parties that many people have today. In his Farewell Address, Washington warned the American people against " the baneful effects of the spirit of party," which he viewed as the "worst enemy" of popular government. More that 100 years later, the Progressive movement in the US was motivated by an effort to root out political corruption which, in its view, was caused by entrenched parties. Also, anti-party sentiments have traditionally formed the basis of third party movements which have been a common feature of the American landscape - - from Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose to Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrats to Ross Perot's Reform Party. In fact, political scientist Marjorie Randon Hershey has characterized the American political system as a " long running conflict between our need for parties and our dislike of them."

However, there is no suitable alternative to the role and function of political parties. The active support and collaboration of strong, inclusive political parties in partnership with a vibrant civil society is fast gaining 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 lies in balancing 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.

Strengthening Political Parties

Political parties have been forced to address their weaknesses and the growing lack of credibility in a variety of ways. These include placing greater emphasis on issues of ethics in public office, modernizing party structures to allow for greater participation, and greater openness and transparency in the operation of government and political systems generally.

Democratization within parties must be a priority in efforts to restore public confidence in political parties and the democratic process generally. Greater citizen participation, accountability of leadership, transparency and institutional safeguards are now more important than ever for the democratization of political parties.

In Latin America, in recent years, new reforms have slowly begun to be adopted, albeit unevenly, in order to stem or reverse the decline of political parties in the region. Reforms have focused on internal democratization of parties and reforming systems for financing parties and electoral campaigns. These include: higher levels of transparency and participation in the selection of party leaders and candidates for public office, including the use of party primaries; greater public funding for parties; limits on private contributions to parties; public disclosure of contributions; and enhanced outreach efforts to women and youth. Regional experts point out, however, that new reform measures

alone will not solve the problem. The behavior of politicians themselves must change; and education and enforcement must accompany reform measures.

The British Labour Party, which came into power in 1997 after 18 years of Tory government, is often cited as a model for party reform, renewal and modernization. Therefore, Labour's ability to change deserves special examination.

When describing their efforts, senior Labour officials first point out that the party's success was borne out of years of failure and, in hindsight, the lessons learned were quite simple. The first was to learn from past mistakes and be prepared to fundamentally change the party reactions. The party went through a series of phased alterations in order to finally understand this basic fact. " We thought the voters should be concerned about what we were worried about," said one senior Labour official. "But needed to be worried about what the electorates were worried about."

Fundamental change came in two primary areas. First, was a reform of Labour's constitution which had, as its core principle, government ownership of the means of production - - not a particularly popular agenda. This was changed to a platform based on social justice and economic prosperity. The second change was a new policy-making process in which government ministers, party members and labor unions communicate year round and not just at annual party congresses. Dubbed " partnership in power", this new approach to communication and policy development reduced tensions within the party, thereby sending a more unified and coherent message to the electorate.

The third change was for the party to talk in " values" rather than a more rigid and doctrinarian " ideology". This new approach was in reaction to the voters who, in the view of Labour Party leaders, were reflecting the rise of individualism in the 1980's. The fourth change was the party becoming more accessible. This included affirmative action for women candidates whose ranks in the parliament rose 19 to 101 following Labour's 1997 win. Accessibility was also extended to party organization at the local level.

Civil society is not to blame for the decline in political parties, and neither are those who promoted 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 has ultimately threatened the foundations of democratic political systems.

For decades, it was believed the 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 predominantly economic in nature – they are intrinsically political. Truly, so-called sustainable development requires the capacity to resolve problems without resorting to violence or repression.