INTERNATIONAL
IDEA
INSTITUTE FOR
DEMOCRACY AND
E L E G T O R A L
ASSISTANCE
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Network Democracy
Enhancing the role of political parties
The role of political parties in building democracy - some
introductory remarks
By Bengt Sive-Saderbergh, Secretary-General of International IDEA
Dear Ministers, Ambassadors, Colleagues and Friends,
Let me first seize this opportunity, on behalf of International IDEA, to sincerely thank
Minister Herfkens, The Government of the Netherlands and the IMD (N etherlands
Institute for Multiparty Democracy) for hosting, financing and co-sponsoring what I

hope and believe will be a very important and thought-provoking conference. I would also like to welcome the founding of IMD and wish this organisation great success. There are considerable challenges facing you with this mandate and I am convinced that your work can make a great difference in many countries.

The focus of this conference is on what should be the heart and soul of democracy, namely political parties. The great Professor of Political Science and scholar, who might have written the most influential books on democracy in modern times Robert Dahl says the following in his latest book "On democracy": "Probably no political institutions shape the political landscape of a democratic country more than its electoral system and its political parties." In my introductory remarks I will explain why I believe this subject and thus this conference to be of great importance. The role of political parties has been more or less neglected in the otherwise flourishing discussions about democratisation.

A vibrant democracy needs active participation by citizens. Democracy also needs representative and efficient institutions and organisations. Do we see this in today's world? My answer is both yes and no. One way to measure participation is to look at elections.

A decade of elections

In this last decade of the 20th century we have seen some remarkable developments. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the idea of one-party rule we saw literally an enormous wave of efforts towards transition to democracy. This last decade was a decade of elections. Measured in terms of the numbers of competitive elections for parliaments and for presidencies our own compendium of statistics shows the following: In the 1980ies there were all in all 291 such elections. In the 1990ies the global ligure more than doubled to achieve a total number of 603. The differences between these two decades become even more striking when you look at specific regions. In Africa in the 1980ies a total number of 29 competitive elections for presidencies and parliament were registered whereas the figure for the 1990ies was 160. In central and Eastern Europe and the CIS, the rest of the former Soviet Empire, only one competitive election took place in the 1980ies as compared to 113 a decade later.

This is about the number of elections. But what about citizens' participation in individual elections? Looking again at global statistics compiled by IDEA on voter turnout since 1945 we see some different trends, but we do not see a major overall decline. Of course we see countries in certain regions and in specific situations with extremely poor voter turnout. In established democracies we see a slow and gradual decrease, which should cause some concern if it continues. Globally, however, there is no dramatic change in the voter turnout statistics. But there is no reason, on the other hand, to be complacent. Democracy has to be gained and regained every day and there is no automaticity once it has been gained.

Civil society/ voluntary organisations

What about civil society and political participation through voluntary organizations? On this I have no comparative statistics but recent research and other observations tend to confirm that there is no general global down turn, rather the opposite. Of course we see great variations in different countries and regions and participation is certainly changing in character. We also know that there is a lot to be done to further stimulate and promote an active and democratic civil society. Furthermore, we are still hoping that participation will be more gender-balanced than before. There has been a strong increase over the last decades in one-issue organizations and particularly those going beyond national borders. This has also, particularly in richer countries, been facilitated by the new information technology. We all lmow that a vibrant and responsible civil society is one prerequisite for democracy to flourish.

Challenges for Political parties

But what about political parties? Here I believe there is reason to be more cautious and concerned. In both established and emerging democracies the role of political parties gives rise to many serious questions. Let me first say that I cannot see a representative democracy system functioning without political parties. There is no case of democracy in recent history without pluralism in political parties. In theory political parties are to set the tone in a democratic society, but are they doing that today? Has this role been partly overtaken by other actors and, if so, why is this? Let me mention four challenges that political parties are currently facing:

1.

Whereas in general political participation may not be declining we see a fairly dramatic fall in membership of parties in established democracies over the last decade. We have to ask ourselves whether this trend will continue and, as well, what the reasons are for this change.

This trend is probably linked to the second challenge. Political parties are traditionally based on ideologies and specific interests. Today we see, particularly among younger people, less belief in these ideologies and thereby less interest in partisan identification. Individuals, identity and individualism are becoming more important. Many citizens are less inclined to subscribe to a whole party program and there is a strong urge to pick and chose from the menus presented - to act more as a consumer than as a participant in the agenda setting of political parties. There is also the emerging trend of ethnicity and religious allegiances replacing traditional ideology.

Trust and respect is key to success of any political party. I think it is true to say that political parties do not enjoy this to the extent we were previome used to. In countries where democracy is about to consolidate it has often been very difficult for political parties to find their proper role: in relation to members and potential members, in relation to other political parties and in relation to the other institutions of democracy. The lack of trust in political parties was recently reported by the Afrobarometer study, which will be presented at this conference. It is also partly linked to the fourth challenge.

Political parties are finding increasing problems in ftmding, whether in election campaigns or running a party in between elections. In this world of media it takes more money than before to make your presence felt. This is the theme of the IDEA Handbook to be presented in more detail later in this conference. The cost of campaigning has, amongst other things, become a source of malpractice around the world. In the overview presenting the Handbook one of the propositions reads: "When it comes to political money, Western nations are in no position to preach virtue to the rest of the world". In other words we all share a fundamental problem. How to make political parties viable in an environment, which has changed quite dramatically. IDEA:s approach is not to be prescriptive; what we want to offer is options and choices for people and organizations in different countries to make themselves. The Handbook promises to be rich and will

certainly raise a lot of practical suggestions, based on practical experience and scholarly research. More about that tomorrow.

IDEA and political parties

For IDEA the publication of this handbook is not an isolated event. The role of political parties was identified earlier as one of the areas, where IDEA would seek to make additional value, to complement at the international level what so many others are doing nationally and in cooperation between parties over the borders. We hope to be able to translate this handbook into several languages and make it available for training and for legislators.

The role of political parties is being partly addressed in a number of other projects and programs of our work. One of our first undertakings was to produce a handbook on electoral systems design, which has been widely used and translated into several languages. The renowned Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart, who is famous in this field, partly by advocating the old Dutch tradition of consensualism, is one of the contributors. We have also published a code of conduct on political party campaigning. Conferences have been and are being organized to highlight the linkages between money and politics. In our capacity building field activities we work with partners and use these comparative studies to support democratisation.

Next steps?

But we want to use this conference to consult with you on what could be most useful in addressing the challenges of political parties beyond financing. In our next three-year work plan we are also looking at what more could be done in the normative held to assist in building well functioning political parties. Let me mention two complementary ideas, which have been suggested by quite a few people and stakeholders:

1. One is about how to build and organize a democratic party: how to achieve democracy within parties, how to be a modern party, where still so many function with guidelines and approaches, which have been there for many decades and maybe

even longer. Particularly in new and emerging democracies the party is sometimes
more seen as an expression of a certain individual rather than the other way around.
What are the possibilities to form and build parties with broad trust among the voters
and the members?
2. A second suggestion is one, which touches on the very heart and the culture of
democracy. When multi-party democracy has been adopted as a principle the issue in
many countries is to make the relations between ruling and opposition parties function
in a peaceful and respectful way: each recognizing and respecting the role of the
other. What are the rights and the obligations of a ruling party and what are the rights
and the responsibilities of an opposition party? Fundamentally this issue is about the
culture of trust and respect and it has to be dealt with in this context. But I still bel
ieve
that the good practices should be exposed - and maybe some bad ones as well. But
just as political parties leam about campaigning and how to address the adversary in
more or less respectthl manners there is a need to learn about the limits and about the
culture that shapes a functioning multi-party democracy. If proper relations between
contestants are not established the whole idea of democracy will be at stake.
These are some ideas. There are probably many others that you will put forward at
this rather unique international conference devoted specifically to the role of political
parties. I look forward with great expectations to the outcome and the follow-up of
this important event. Once more I would like to sincerely thank our Dutch partners for
making this conference happen.
Thank you