

DIPD

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PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL PARTIES



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ABBREVIATIONS

CISU	Civil Society in Development
CMI	Christian Micheelsen Institute
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
Danida	Danish International Development Agency
DIPD	Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy
EISA	Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NIMD	Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1 INTRODUCTION

Is support to political parties and civil society two sides of the same story? This was the key question as Danish political parties and civil society organisations came together 10 May 2012 to discuss support to political participation, hosted by the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD) and Civil Society in Development (CISU).

Political parties and civil society have different roles in society. In societies where democracy is severely challenged the difference is, however, not always as clear cut. This was one of the key findings at the seminar.

This brief paper was drafted as a background document for the seminar and focus on political participation and democratization as seen from a civil society and political party perspective. The Seminar was an expression of the wish to explore commonalities and differences and especially synergies in the way that civil society and political parties approach political participation and this paper follows this direction.

Political parties – the missing actor in support for democratisation

There is generally an agreement that political parties are key actors in any representative democracy. Yet, until recently international democracy assistance has been hesitant to engage with political parties.

With the establishment of DIPD in May 2010, political parties have been granted a more prominent role in Danish support for democratization in the developing world. The Institute supports capacity building of political parties and multiparty systems among other things by supporting partnerships between Danish political parties on one hand and political parties in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East on the other.

DIPD is mandated to support democratization through engagement with multi-party platforms and democratic political parties, movements and organisations.

In undertaking this task DIPD has tapped the knowledge and experience available within the wider community engaging with support to political parties, available in the publication Political Party Support – Lessons Learned (www.dipd.dk).

The synthesis of lessons learned showed that there is a great need to better appreciate the role of political parties in furthering democratization and democratic cultures, and that the role of political parties has been neglected in the overall governance approaches supported by international donors.

Some of the main findings in relation to the topic of this paper were that

- More generally, attempting to support positive political reform, including greater accountability, without engaging with political parties, leaves out a key set of actors in the overall political process (Carothers 2008, 7).
- The acknowledgement that political parties are the cornerstones of representative democracy. Political parties and party systems are necessary for functioning democratic governance systems, and appropriately designed political systems that are free, open and rights-based help to enhance effective democratic governance (Reitzes et al. 2010, 1).
- Political parties require as much nurturing and attention as other social and political institutions, including parliaments, government departments, non-

governmental organizations or election management bodies, which receive both scholarly attention as well as technical assistance and development aid (Reitzes et al. 2010, 2).

- There is, however, increasing recognition of their (political parties) importance, not just during elections, but in relation to a wide range of governance and accountability processes (Wild and Foresti 2010, 1).
- Political parties are important, even indispensable from a good governance perspective, and thus eligible for donor support (Amundsen 2007, 1).

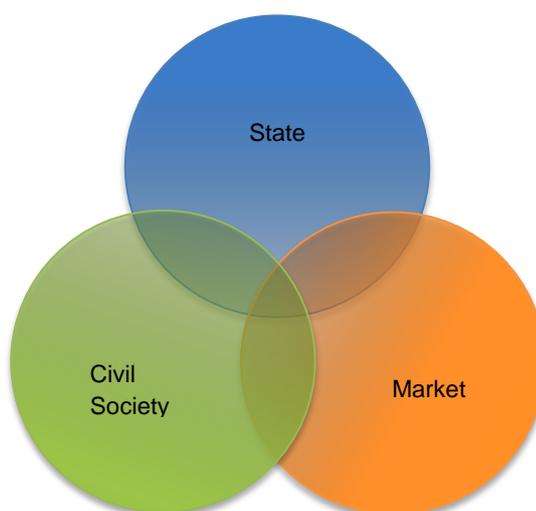
While there are an increasing number of agencies developing papers on political party assistance (UNDP, Danida, OECD/DAC) it is also clear that this work is undertaken unrelated to other fields of work such as overall governance policies or the strengthening of civil society. In fact, many civil society concept papers and strategies do not at all deal with political movements and political organisations. The seminar also pointed to the fact that while civil society organisations have become very preoccupied with political advocacy and policy impact very few of them engage with political parties.

2 THE STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY AND MARKET TRIANGLE

In much literature about political participation and the role of civil society the point of departure is taken in the state, civil society, market triangle.¹

The governance triangle of state, civil society and market is often used to understand interacting relationships between key stakeholders and the institutional functions regarding development processes. Institutional relations in welfare states have also typically been studied in terms of the 'triangle' of the market, the state and civil society.²

Figure 2.1: State, market and civil society triangle³



The definition and role of civil society is well explored in this triangle approach. For example, the widely recognised definition of civil society by White: “an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values”⁴. White thus distinguishes civil society from the family and the state.

Also, the ways in which civil society can engage with the state or the market is subject to a lot of academic work. The interesting thing is that in this triangle the state remains a somewhat black box. If defined further it may be in terms of broader governance concepts or the traditional division between the legislative, executive and judiciary powers.

Another interesting feature is that political parties are seldom mentioned – neither as part of civil society, nor as part of the state. So where do they belong? And how does political participation within civil society and political parties differ?

¹ CISU in April 2012 adopted a paper on CSO cooperation taking departure in the state, civil society and market triangle.

² Zijderveld 1999

³ Translated from CISU 2012.

⁴ White 2004, 20

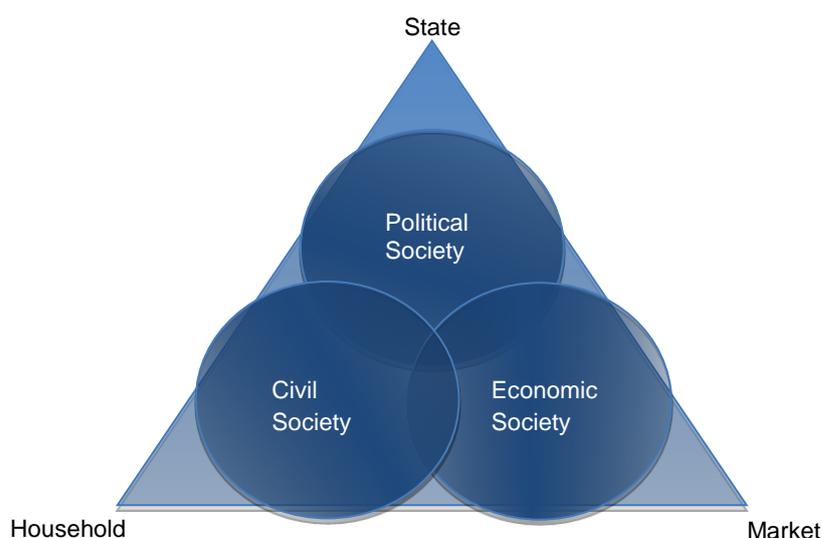
3 POLITICAL SOCIETY

While they are often overlooked, political parties do of course exist implicitly within this triangle, but to make this visible it is necessary and relevant to adjust and expand it further.

For example, Linz and Stepan distinguish between civil society, political society and economic society as a social space between market, state and household.⁵

The distinction between political and civil society is useful for a number of reasons, as also reflected in the figure presented here:

Figure 3.1 Triangle of societies⁶



The categories of space between these three institutions are occupied by a plurality of associational relationships that include political parties, trade unions, NGO's etc. The goals and the rules of the various associations that make up each space determine their location within the triangle. The closer an institution is to one of the corners, the stronger is the impact of institutional rules and norms that characterise that corner.⁷

Political parties belong to the realm of social action known as political society. According to Stepan 'political society' refers to political parties, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, intraparty alliances and legislatures by which society constitutes itself politically to select and monitor democratic government.⁸ Specifically, political society refers to the institutions through which social actors seek to win and exercise state power.

White prefers to narrow the definition of "political society" down to parties and political leaders. He considers legislatures and electoral systems "as part of institutional patterning of the state".⁹ Both definitions exclude political parties from civil society on the grounds that they compete for national office. Yet, some political parties clearly claim to the civil society organisations, such as the Social Liberal Party in Denmark, which maintains the rule that their Chair cannot be an elected Member of Parliament. Thus, the party distinguishes between its identity within civil society and political society.

According to Linz and Stepan a democratic transition and especially democratic consolidation must involve political society: "The composition and consolidation of a democratic poli-

⁵ Linz & Stepan 1996, 7-11

⁶ Zijderfeld 1999

⁷ This section has been drafted with support from Jasper Veen, Political Party Consultant

⁸ Linz & Stepan 1996, 8

⁹ White 2004, 20

ty must entail serious action and thought in the development...of those core institutions of a democratic political society...”¹⁰ They are concerned with the question what makes democracy work. The concerns are with stability, sustainability and legitimacy of the political order. The associations of civil society can positively contribute as long as they accept the limits of their role as well as the fact that the health of the entire order demands the aggregation and channelling of their interests by political parties.

According to Linz and Stepan both a free and lively civil society and a relatively autonomous political society are necessary for a democratic consolidation. They stress the importance of understanding the difference between the two as well as their complementarity.¹¹

The centrality of political parties

Political parties are considered to be indispensable institutions in a democracy,¹² although the relationship between democracy and political parties is more often assumed than demonstrated.¹³

The arguments why political parties are assumed to be important in a democratic polity are linked with the functions that political parties ought to perform. These functions either distinguish political parties from other political institutions because only political parties can perform them or perform them better than other institutions.

Broadly three functions are identified. Firstly, political parties in a well-functioning democracy represent citizens' interests before the state and are thus the main vehicle behind representation. Secondly, political parties are the main elements in the organisation of government as they form the government and take responsibility for governing. Thirdly, political parties are important channels for maintaining democratic accountability as they engage and involve citizens in democratic participation and structure political choices.

A recent publication by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) notes that: “political parties play a vital role in democratic governance. No democratic system can function without alternative parties and candidates. Political parties are crucial in aggregating interests, presenting policy alternatives to citizens, nominating candidates and linking voters with elected public officials. Moreover, political parties can play a central role in generating cadres of leaders who promote democratic governance principles and monitor elected representatives”.¹⁴

From this perspective, political parties can therefore act as effective agents of better democracies, since core democratic processes and institutions are shaped by them. However, we should be wary of assuming that all parties behave in the same way and perform the same functions. These will vary across different regimes and political cultures as Carothers outlined in his assessment of aiding political parties.¹⁵

Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that political parties are organisations whose primary function is to seek office and wield government power. To be an effective agency of democratisation will therefore also depend very much on the political system or regime it operates in.

However, the weaknesses of political parties are as important to take into consideration as their supposedly key democratic roles.

¹⁰ Linz & Stepan 1996, 8

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lipset 2000

¹³ Biezen 2003

¹⁴ UNDP 2006, 92

¹⁵ Carothers 2006

4 DIFFERENCES AND OVERLAP

When talking about differences between political parties and NGOs the question of competing for political power is often held as the most importance difference. Secondly, the political representation within democratic systems is also a defining feature of political parties.

Thus, political parties as we know them today are actually a more recent phenomenon as outlined by Biezen: “While parties when they first emerged were not necessarily seen as inevitable, let alone desirable, it was with the advent of mass democracy that the notion of the party as a necessary intermediary between individual citizens and the state became more widely acknowledged”.¹⁶

Sartori, for instance, has said that political parties are or should be: “an instrument for representing the people by expressing their demands”.¹⁷ This intermediary structure is further described by Poguntke:

“Parties...live in the sphere of the state, largely controlling the selection of political personnel of all important institutions of the state... At the same time, they remain voluntary social organisations whose viability depends also on their roots in society. It is exactly this dual role as state actors and societal organisations which make political parties so essential for democratic governance”.¹⁸

In this intermediary realm political parties are confronted with another actor, civil society organisations, which also function as an organised expression of public opinion or the opinion and preferences of sections of the public. They too perform socialising and mobilising functions as institutionalised representatives of civil society.

Thus, both political parties and civil society actors are important when linking the state to civil society. It may cause confusion as it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between civil society organisations and political parties. An old rule of thumb is that parties are in the business of winning elections and wielding power while civil society organisations are not holds true. For the most part, civil society actors do not contest elections and their rationale is to act on behalf of particular interests and articulate their demands. However, in reality things are more complex and occasionally even civil society groups put candidates up for election. Doherty captures this point very well:

“A dynamic civil society fosters many elements essential to democracy: participation, accountability, and sustainable political reform. Civil society organisations contribute to the shaping of policy making technical expertise available for 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 marginalised and act as a vehicle for their participation in civic life when working through political parties may not be the best option”.¹⁹

A quick look at the roles frequently attributed to civil society organisations and political parties reveals great overlap. Wading through the muddy waters between the distinction of political parties and civil society organisations a summary of their functions in the process of democratic consolidation is outlined below.

¹⁶ Biezen 2004

¹⁷ Sartori 2005

¹⁸ Poguntke 2002

¹⁹ Doherty 2001, 25-35

Key political party and civil society functions

Functions	Political parties	CSO	Overlap
Representation	Standing in elections for members and constituents and helping to articulate and aggregate citizens' interests to translate into government policies	Mobilise, sensitize, consult and aggregate citizens' interests, including in policy processes, but cannot implement policies	Both occupy a crucial space between citizens & state or government in policy process
Conflict management	Parties across the political divide to work together	Reducing conflict by cross-cutting cleavages	
Making government accountable	Central role in horizontal & vertical accountability. Managing the state when in government and presenting alternatives when out.	Several roles associated with holding governments and political parties accountable for their actions and promises e.g. through monitoring	CSOs and opposition parties both play a watch dog role
Leadership development	Acting as a recruitment & training ground for political leaders managing society	Open arena for recruitment & training, not necessarily with intention of preparing for office	Both can nurture future leaders although for CSOs it's less deliberate
Institutionalising democracy	Parties should be a mechanism to which people become habituated to democratic norms and procedures	Socialisation in democratic values and practises	Both play a crucial role in enhancing democratic values and practises
Regime legitimacy	Endowing regimes with legitimacy by providing ideologies, leadership and opportunities for competitive political participation	(Providing service delivery and gap-filling functions or advocacy on the failures of and responsibilities of government)	(Both play a role in sustaining or challenging regime legitimacy)

Source: Adapted by Jasper Veen based on USAID and Randall & Svåsand.²⁰

Some key observations are warranted: Firstly, the space political parties and civil society organisations occupy between citizens and the state both claim to be a conduit for aggregating citizens' interests. Secondly, both play an important role in holding governments accountable.

²⁰ Randall & Svåsand 2002; USAID 2004

NGOs don't form Governments – Political Parties do!

Youth Political Activist, Kenya

A critical distinction commonly made is that political parties seek to control state power whereas civil society organisations do not.

But political parties and civil society organisations are both constituent parts of a broader political system each contributing to the survival and development of a country's political system. These contributions are distinct and complementary and vary across and within countries and overtime.

Therefore, it also makes good sense to strengthen the interplay between political parties and civil society in advancing accountability and representation. But are they also competing for attention and citizens support?

Civil society means new challenges and opportunities

The traditional weaknesses of political parties have often been listed as reasons for civil society organisations to stay out of politics or not engage with political parties, and certainly not to support them within democracy promotion programmes. The saying often goes: Political parties deal with power and power corrupts! End of story.

So while parties are essential for representative democracy they at the same time fare poorly in public surveys in relation to public trust in government institutions.²¹

The Global Parliamentary Report argues that a number of new trends place new challenges on political parties and also influence the relationship between civil society and political society. Parties are based on principles of collective representation of interests, but significant cultural, technological and political trends are challenging this and in particular a growing individualism across cultures. Levels of identification with political parties are declining in established democracies and many citizens turn to civil society and single issue organisations to have their voices heard and exert political pressure.²²

The civil society organisations often demonstrate a far larger number of members and a higher level of voluntarism than the political parties do and citizens appreciate that they are directly active with various projects in their own communities, whereas political parties tend to work through government programmes and institutions to reach their goals.

In fact, the Global Parliamentary Report claims that political parties are increasingly seen as “getting in the way of effective representation, rather than facilitating it” with reference to parties instructing politicians to follow the party policy in order to establish cohesion, which in turn is indispensable for member mobilisation. In that way political parties easily get caught in a catch-22.

However, new social media technologies are doing a lot in terms of narrowing this gap between individual and collective representation and allowing citizens to be much more directly in contact with MPs and party leaders. This also strengthens local party branches. Technological advancements also allow for a new interaction mode between political parties and civil society organisations as the social media platforms entertain dialogues in a cross-party and cross-sectorial manner.

²¹ Power 2012, 13

²² Power 2012, 18

Strengthening the interplay between political parties and civil society?

So where do we see efforts which strengthen the interplay between political parties and civil society?

In the Myanmar Multi-Party Democracy Programme undertaken jointly by DIPD and NIMD a key objective is to strengthen the constructive interplay between political parties and civil society as well as the media. Many of the political party assistance organisations also focus on enhancing the relationship between parties and civil society organisations. In many countries there is suspicion among NGOs when dealing with political parties and vice versa such as in Tanzania.

Experience shows that civil society can make an important contribution to political parties in terms of:

- ◆ developing policy positions and policy programmes
- ◆ accessing knowledge and research on various themes and groups of citizens
- ◆ acting as loud speakers on key reform issues
- ◆ putting an ear to the ground and understanding the electorate
- ◆ innovating on voter articulation and representation
- ◆ calling for accountability of political leaders

Finally, it goes without saying that within civil society democratic values and cultures are embedded, which also strongly influence the life of the political parties. Civil society organisations present many alternative avenues for political participation, helps build leadership for trusted positions and thus an atmosphere of political plurality that democratisation and political parties benefit from.

Similarly, political parties can make an important contribution to the work of civil society organisations, i.e.

- ◆ providing a political channel for advocacy on key reform issues
- ◆ navigating in the political dynamics and processes
- ◆ providing key information on policy processes and proposals
- ◆ providing access to the party constituency
- ◆ facilitating a conducive regulatory and legal environment for civil society organisations

Looking at recent literature on development and change there is much evidence pointing in the direction that change is more likely when coalitions for reform are nourished in which case the alliances between political parties and civil society also play an important role.²³

²³ See works by Developmental Leadership Program (www.dlprog.org).

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