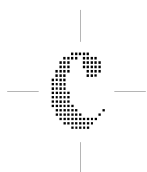


# Political Party Development in Conflict-Prone Societies

## Seminar Report

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# Table of Content

<b>Background</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Party Engineering and Power-Sharing in Conflict-Prone Societies</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Political Party Regulation: Scope and Objectives</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Role, Challenges and Opportunities for International Actors</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Dilemmas for Policy</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Contact</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Program Expert Meeting</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>List of Participants</b>	<b>12</b>

## Background

On 25 October 2006, the Clingendael Institute in collaboration with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI), and United Nations University (UNU), hosted a one-day expert seminar in The Hague. The seminar brought together scholars, policy makers, and practitioners concerned with the emerging area of political party development in conflict-prone societies. In addition to providing input for an upcoming UNU Press publication on party regulation<sup>1</sup>, the seminar offered a platform for experts to share theoretical insights and practical experiences with new developments in the field of political party development and party engineering.

## Introduction

A number of years ago engagement with political parties was considered controversial by international aid agencies. More recently, however, outside efforts to strengthen party organization and stimulate inter-party competition (i.e. political party development) as well as regulatory initiatives to shape the nature of political parties and party systems (i.e. party engineering) have become more prominent. Party development and party engineering play an important role in creating stable political systems, not only in post-conflict countries like East Timor, Kosovo, and Afghanistan that have experienced major armed conflict, but also in divided societies like Indonesia, Nigeria, and Bosnia with deep socioeconomic and ethnic cleavages. With the absence of strong political institutions, both type of societies are conflict-prone as divisions and cleavages can easily be exploited to heighten tensions and (re-)create violent conflict. Therefore, attempts have been made to regulate political parties in order to control the conflict potential of such divisions. Contrary to popular belief, most of the efforts in the field of party development and party engineering to regulate and stabilize conflict-prone societies, do not come from the international community but are home-grown initiatives. This seminar set out to examine what lessons can be drawn from such initiatives and how the international community can best engage with political parties.

Without attributing comments to individual participants, this report briefly summarizes the findings and recommendations produced in the four seminar sessions, and consecutively highlights: the recognition of party regulation as an engineering tool in divided societies and the necessity to understand the role of parties in power-sharing arrangements; the broad range and objectives of party regulations; the challenges and opportunities for international engagement; and major policy dilemmas in this field.

## Party Engineering and Power-Sharing in Conflict-Prone Societies

The first session focused on political party engineering and on power-sharing arrangements that emerge after peace negotiations. In conflict-prone societies, political parties may consolidate peace and stability by formulating their policies on the basis of aggregated interests and forming governments with otherwise opposing groups. Political parties therefore have the capacity to bridge or worsen cleavages in societies. It was argued that whether parties act as managers or as instigators of

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Reilly and Per Nordlund (eds) (2007, *forthcoming*) *Political Party Regulation in Conflict Prone-Societies* (Tokyo: UNU Press).

conflict, depends on whether they wish to bridge social divisions or whether they wish to represent social cleavages.

The first presentation distinguished between two categories of party systems that emerge after civil war. In one category, a fairly stable party system emerges, that shows a crystallisation of parties and views when tensions heighten. In this case, strong social networks and ties exist with the societal factions that parties represent (e.g. Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka). The second category consists of highly fluid party systems with many small factions that are highly fragmented. In the latter case, parties usually revolve around strong 'patrons', which results in volatile party structures (e.g. Sierra Leone, Liberia, Iraq, Cambodia). In attempting to influence party formation one must bear in mind that these diverse party systems require a different approach.

Traditionally, constitutionalists have attempted to avoid political parties, the assumption being that parties should be left to develop freely. One of the presenters asserted, however, that practice has shown that unbridled party formation in conflict-prone societies may contribute to the emergence of ethnic parties and that the formation of aggregated interests, bridging societal groups, is a long process. The danger of ethnically based parties is that as parties compete, the politics of outbidding one another may spiral them into more extremist views. This can lead to many problems, ultimately resulting in separatist movements and failure of democracies.

Evidence suggests that countries with large ethnic cleavages are better off having only a limited number of parties that represent the most important aggregated interests. However, the trend, as seen in Iraq, is for the international community to seek to have all interests represented in emerging democracies. Nevertheless, large regional differences exist with regard to views on minority representation in government. In Europe, the assumption is that allowing minorities to form political parties is a good thing. In Asia, however, where policy makers are particularly concerned with maintaining 'stability', there is a trend towards restriction of ethnically-based party politics. Moreover, states that have separatist movements operating within their territory are generally more aggressive in not allowing non-national parties to take part in local elections, Indonesia being an extreme example of this. Many states now demand multi-ethnic representation and so-called 'spatial distribution' laws whereby parties should be broad-based and have a cross-country reach.

In light of the debate over short-term stability versus long-term democratic change, participants recommended that in the short run, peace is best consolidated by a large degree of party freedom. This would result in the representation of all views in electoral politics. Such an inclusive political system will encourage actors that may otherwise attempt to secure their interests with violent means to engage in legitimate politics. At a later stage of the peace-building process, however, it is essential that politics start to revolve around other, non-ethnic issues. This is particularly important for the sake of long-term objectives such as reconciliation and post-war reconstruction. As this development may not occur organically, the introduction of a greater degree of party regulation may be imperative. Yet, to limit the most negative effects of the discourse and symbolism used by political parties on peace and thus to avoid re-escalation of the conflict, some degree of party regulation may prove valuable even during the initial post-war period.

### **Political Party Regulation: Scope and Objectives**

The second session revolved around political party regulation, here defined as a deliberate attempt by a state or any outside actor to regulate and influence a political party's structure, funding, legal status, membership, etcetera. Party regulation was considered to be different from party engineering. In the words of one of the participants: regulation is a reactive process: it attempts to achieve a desired

result after examining empirical observations. Party regulation is usually implemented when political parties and party systems are already in place, and therefore provides a form of 'system maintenance'. Engineering, on the other hand, is a proactive process that requires well-developed theoretical knowledge to design a future state of affairs and to achieve the desired result. Party engineering usually takes place before political systems are established, and can therefore be seen as a form of 'system creation'.

As highlighted by one of the presenters, nations generally follow five different models of political party regulation: nations that *proscribe* parties by law forbid them from operating entirely; nations that *prescribe* for parties seek to mould them to fit an ideal; nations that *permit* parties allow them to operate freely; nations that *promote* parties actively support them; and nations that *protect* parties favour certain ones over others.

The nature of regulations varies widely across and within different regions. Among others, it includes constitutional regulation, regulation by law, other forms of formal regulation, as well as voluntary regulation. During one of the presentations, it was argued that because constitutional regulations may be slow to establish and tend to have a permanent character, incentives toward voluntary regulation can in many cases provide a useful alternative. The voluntary adoption of quota to promote female participation in government in Sweden was mentioned as an example.

(Post-conflict) elections were highlighted as one field wherein regulations have often been applied. However, there was a strong sentiment among participants that we should move beyond a focus on electoral regulations, as these will only tell half the story with regard to the political landscape. Other important regulations, like ballot access and campaigning regulations are also likely to have a strong impact on the democratic process and should therefore not be overlooked.

To establish a successful basis for democracy, it is important that the international community when it engages in political party engineering, recognises when national party regulation is based on the right, democratic, principles, and when it is being used to merely benefit the incumbent government. Also, participants warned of unexpected consequences of party and party system engineering (as illustrated by recent events in Thailand, where one party eventually benefited from the strong party regulations) and stressed the need to recognise the long-term impact of external interventions.

When employed in an adequate manner, party regulation can facilitate the shift from a political system based on representation of singular interests through 'identity politics' to a system based on representation and aggregation of broader interests. In this respect, participants identified a difference in party formation between old and new democracies. In West-Europe, 'mass parties' emerged 'from below', evolving out of societal needs and depending on broad political inclusion to fare well in political competition. As a result, mass parties had strong links to and from society and, at least in the beginning, had limited structured interaction with the state. Political parties in new democracies, on the other hand, are usually formed in a more artificial manner 'from above'. Additionally, they seem to have weaker links with society, and are often characterized by a greater dependency on the state, particularly for funding. In these new democracies, political parties first evolve around singular cleavages as these provide a key feature for parties to distinguish themselves.

Another debate centred on the issue of intra-party democracy. One participant remarked that while many international agencies are now advocating for more intra-party democracy, there is actually no conclusive evidence that this has a positive effect on the greater political system. Intra-party democracy is certainly important, as it can help to widen a party's support base and programmatic appeal. However, experiences with stimulating intra-party democracy in Western Europe have shown that it may also weaken the ability of the party leadership to adopt necessary, but

unpopular positions (e.g. the Green Party in Germany). Therefore, it was argued that the key to creating political stability in most conflict-prone societies lies first and foremost in securing democratic inter-party competition, instead of stimulating democratic intra-party governance.

### **Role, Challenges and Opportunities for International Actors**

The third session focused on international party assistance strategies, and identified challenges to international engagement, as well as strengths and weaknesses of international party assistance.

International party assistance can help to discourage political parties from taking polarised stands by building confidence and trust, and by strengthening democratic principles. This can be done, for instance, by providing “support on the basis of a properly processed strategic programme with milestones on how the party plans to move from A to B in becoming less personality-driven and more institutionalized”. Donor agencies may choose various mechanisms for providing support to democratic party building. During the discussions, three main clusters of approaches were identified: party-to-party approaches; mixed approaches; and multi-party approaches. One participant asserted that in the past the ‘party-to-party’ approach was arguably most effective whereas current thinking seems to favour a multi-party approach. However, the success of these methods is dependent upon a multitude of factors, and participants agreed that the effectiveness and usefulness of each approach is highly context-specific.

On the topic of strategy, one participant emphasised the importance of “think[ing] impartially of how to achieve mechanisms for democracy.” An important focus of party assistance should be to help parties develop a political and social agenda that aims to deliver concrete basic services to the electorate. This will not only create awareness among citizens as to how democracy can benefit them directly, but will also strengthen the basis of party-based politics. Along the same line, one presenter remarked that “the restoration of the primacy of politics is an important condition to ensure that the focus on ownership and partnership does not become a new token of symbolism as is often the case today.”

The main challenges to party assistance that were identified included the underlying structural problems and the management of so-called ‘spoilers’. To manage both challenges, international agencies must recognise that people with vested interests will not give up their influence voluntarily and may evade aid, block it, or channel it to their own supporters. The promotion of dialogue can provide a bridge to overcoming some of these restrictions. Secondly, as discussed in earlier sessions, international party assistance should take into account that cleavages emerging in post-conflict states or post-authoritarian states are different to the traditional Western cleavages and that the development of broader-based parties representing aggregated interests takes time, and in many cases might include some tailoring of the party system.

### **Dilemmas for Policy**

In the fourth and final session there was an opportunity for donor agencies to react to issues raised in previous sessions. Two questions were highlighted in this regard: 1) in the first phase of rebuilding a post-conflict society, is there a trade-off between stability and democracy?; 2) should international actors engage with all parties, or if not, on what basis can they restrict their aid to certain parties?

With respect to the first question, two different approaches were highlighted: a ‘security first’ approach, which argues that the creation of a secure environment is paramount and all other activities should wait, versus a ‘security will follow’ approach, which argues that the organization of quick

elections can provide a way to accommodate various interests, legitimize new state institutions, and thereby diminish the risk of further conflict. In practice, both approaches have been applied and no single approach has proven to be most successful. Nevertheless, in view of the broad range of urgent needs in post-conflict situations, it was felt that some form of prioritization and sequencing is inevitable. In regard to political party development, most participants agreed that a distinction should be made between what can (and should) be done in the short-term (e.g. fostering inter-party competition) and what can be postponed until later (e.g. strengthening party organization and fostering intra-party democracy).

With respect to the second question, participants debated the ethical basis for donors to be selective in their choice of political parties to work with. The general sentiment was that in order to receive international support, political parties should adhere to some general democratic principles, for example, acceptance of the existence of other political viewpoints, recognition of elections as the only channel to compete for power, and an appreciation of dialogue as the basis for solving political disputes. Even for parties that adhere to non-democratic ideologies, improving dialogue and the establishment of relationships based on trust is important.

In the final session, the organizers closed the seminar by thanking the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs for its generous financial support for making the seminar possible, and by thanking all presenters and other participants for their input. Moreover, they expressed the hope that the discussion on the role of international actors in political party development in conflict-prone societies would be continued in different fora in the future.

## **Contact**

For further information on this seminar as well as additional background material, please contact:

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### Program Expert Meeting

## ‘Political Party Development in Conflict-prone Societies’

Organized by the Clingendael Institute  
in collaboration with International IDEA, Centre for Democratic Institutions and  
United Nations University

25 October 2006

- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| 09.00 | Registration and Coffee / Tea   |
| 09.30 | Opening and Welcome to Participants<br><i>Luc van de Goor, Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute</i><br><i>Roger Hållhag, International IDEA</i>  |
| 09.40 | Introduction to the Workshop<br><i>Jeroen de Zeeuw, Clingendael Institute</i>   |
| 09.50 | <b>Part I: Political Parties in Conflict-Prone Societies</b><br>Chair: <i>Luc van de Goor, Clingendael Institute</i><br><br>Political Party Engineering in Divided Societies<br><i>Ben Reilly, Centre for Democratic Institutions</i><br><br>Political Parties and Power-Sharing After War<br><i>Timothy Sisk, University of Denver</i> |
| 10.15 | Discussion  |
| 11.00 | Coffee/Tea Break  |

- 11.30      **Part II: Political Party Regulation**
- Chair: *Roger Hällhag, International IDEA*
- Overview of Party Regulation in Conflict-Prone Societies  
*Per Nordlund, International IDEA*
- Political Party Development in Conflict-Prone Societies  
*Kenneth Janda, Northwestern University*
- 12.30      Lunch
- 13.45      Discussion ( Part II continued)
- 14.15      **Part III: Political Party Development and International Actors**
- Chair: *Krishna Kumar, USAID*
- Challenges for International Engagement  
*Pippa Norris, UNDP (Democratic Governance Group)*
- International Party Assistance Strategies  
*Roel von Meijenfeldt, Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy*  
*Marc Saxer, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*
- Strengths and Weaknesses of International Party Assistance  
*Ivan Doherty, National Democratic Institute*
- 15.00      Discussion
- 15.30      Coffee/Tea Break
- 16.00      **Part IV Policy Response**  
Short reaction by NL MFA, DFID, SIDA, Norwegian MFA, AECI, etc.
- Chair: *Jeroen de Zeeuw, Clingendael Institute*
- 16.15      Discussion
- 17.00      Closure  
*Roger Hällhag, International IDEA*  
*Luc van de Goor, Clingendael Institute*
- 17.15      Reception
- 19.00      Dinner

## List of Participants

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