

Support to political parties

A missing piece of the governance puzzle

Attempts to build better governance and more accountable states cannot ignore the key role of political parties. Donor efforts to help build more accountable and better governed states can founder, where they overlook country-specific political processes and structures. Donors have at times been unrealistic about what is politically achievable, and have failed to recognise that imposing reforms without domestic support does not work (Wild et al., 2010a). Political parties can be important in this respect.

Donor support for governance and accountability has, traditionally, focused on demand and supply-side institutions inside and outside of government, including line ministries and civil society. Political parties are often sidelined, reflecting concerns about political sensitivities. At times, it is true that political parties themselves have been the 'weakest link', reinforcing patronage or the centralisation of power (Carothers, 2006). There is, however, increasing recognition of their importance, not just during elections, but in relation to a wide range of governance and accountability processes.

There is scope for donor agencies to support political parties, but this will require innovation and stronger links between development and diplomacy.

Why political parties matter

In theory, political parties play key roles in well-functioning democracies. They aggregate and represent citizen's interests, formulate policy agendas that respond to those interests, and form governments and oppositions.

In reality, however, political parties in many developing and transition countries have only weak links to citizens. They are often dominated by elites, with few incentives to respond to citizens' concerns. In countries like Nigeria and Uganda, many are disconnected from their own grassroots and lack effective organisation (and representation) at local levels – although the



Political parties – such as Uganda's National Resistance Movement – play an important role in governance and accountability processes.

politicisation of state machinery can mean ruling parties are better established at these levels.

In parts of Latin America, the legitimacy crisis of political parties has led to alternative forms of representation and social movements such as the *Movimiento Al Socialismo* in Bolivia. As these gain political office, the distinction between them and more formal political parties has blurred. In transition countries such as Georgia, a dominant party system and a legacy of one party rule have, together, broken the links between political parties and their representative functions. The extent to which political parties have weakened their links to citizens in many parts of the world deserves closer examination, particularly for donors wishing to strengthen citizen-state relations.

Nevertheless, political parties still play important roles in the organisation of government. Firstly, they matter for the organisation of elections. Political parties from Georgia to Nepal to Uganda are focused on elections, and range from being vehicles whereby individuals win power, to parties that still aim to win elections but also have a programmatic element.

Secondly, they are crucial to maintain power following an election. In Uganda, the ruling party (the National Resistance Movement, NRM) effec-

Key points

- Political parties matter for governance in developing countries, and donors should engage with them more effectively
- Donor support to political parties rarely engages with the realities that shape party development
- Effective support needs to go beyond technocratic solutions and build stronger links between development and diplomacy

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tively works to consolidate the power of the President and his supporters, including ensuring their re-election. Its longevity and history under a ‘no party’ system means it often subsumes opposition members into its ranks by offering patronage and access to resources. In this way, it has influenced the selection of key personnel and maintained power outside of elections. In Nepal, the main political parties help to maintain rent-seeking and patronage, with political favours exchanged for future votes (Hachhethu, 2007).

Thirdly, political parties can contribute to shaping moments of state formation, particularly in fragile contexts – positively or negatively. In Nigeria, the role of political parties in election violence in 2007 revealed how political parties can instigate instability, reinforced by the weak rule of law and the complicity of state institutions. In Nepal, however, seven political parties in Parliament, along with the Maoists, negotiated a Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006, ending a civil war that had lasted 10 years. The Maoists’ transition from an armed movement to a political party has been important to ensure stability.

These examples suggest that ignoring political parties is a risky strategy for donor agencies. They also suggest the need to move away from viewing political parties in isolation, as they cannot be easily separated from the wider political system. Presidential systems, for example, shape party dynamics. Formally, Georgia is a semi-presidential system but is often referred to as ‘super-presidential’, given the strong formal and informal influence of the President, consolidated since the 2003 Rose Revolution. In Uganda and Nigeria, the alternation between military and civilian rule, and the prevalence of so-called ‘big man’ politics, have contributed to institutional set-ups that concentrate power in the hands of the President and ruling party.

The particularities of electoral systems and legislation also define, to some extent, the number of parties and the interaction between them. Where countries have a ‘first past the post’ (or majoritarian) electoral system, one party is more likely to dominate, although this plays out differently in each country. This means that political parties should be seen as one of a range of actors that interact to shape political processes.

This may seem obvious, but is rarely apparent in much of the governance analysis and support provided by the international community. There is a general lack of understanding about the role of political parties in country political systems. Terms used to define the governance landscape, such as the executive, legislature and civil society, do not capture the roles played by political parties, reflecting their neglect in development theory and practice.

As a result, support to parties has not been very targeted. Donors have tended to work with political parties in isolation, using blueprint approaches that assume that the weaknesses of political parties

can be treated in the same way in each country. In reality, while the symptoms may look the same, their causes are highly context-specific and require tailored interventions, as well as ways of working that may go beyond the comfort zones of some international actors.

Why and how donors support political parties

Key funders of support to political parties in developing countries include the US, Germany, the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands, and multilateral organisations such as the European Commission (EC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Party support is nothing new for most of these actors, which have openly supported democratisation since the 1990s. However, a closer examination of motivations and approaches reveals a more complex picture. In some cases security, stabilisation and foreign policy objectives are the main drivers of party support.

For the US, support to political parties is part of its commitment to promote democracy, a key goal since the Cold War and one that has largely transcended party lines. In Georgia, for example, the US provided significant political and other support to the Rose Revolution and subsequent change of regime. Its current support to Georgian political parties grows out of this earlier geo-political engagement.

Increasingly, donor agencies such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) have begun to consider party support that is more developmental. The Deepening Democracy Programme in Uganda, for example, reflects a context of high aid dependency and a growing focus on governance and political reforms as part of securing development outcomes. The reasons different actors support political parties inform programmatic choices, including funding and implementation.

Party foundations have also played key roles in funding and implementing party support. These can be affiliated to particular parties, such as the German party foundations (known as *Stiftungen*), which have separate organisations for each of the main political parties, or the American National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), which retain some party affiliation but work on a cross-party basis in many countries. The Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy (NIMD) is a relative newcomer and includes representation from all major political parties in the Netherlands.

The most common approach to party support aims to strengthen democratisation and has involved funding, through an implementer, for capacity development and technical assistance. In Nigeria and Uganda, the US funds the NDI and IRI to work on capacity development activities including the development of party manifestos, party constitutions and campaigning skills. Other common forms

Box 1: Grant-making facility for political parties in Uganda

The Deepening Democracy Programme in Uganda is administered by a Programme Management Unit (PMU) and supported through a basket fund with contributions from Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and DFID. Of a total budget of £11 million, the political party component receives £1.2 million from April 2008 to December 2011. It has two dimensions; a grant-making facility and support for inter-party dialogue. Grants are open to all parties, but these must undergo an assessment process and meet eligibility criteria. The level of grant is linked to party income, and grants cannot be higher than the amount of money raised in the previous year. This programme was designed to address calls for greater flexibility in support from political parties themselves and a context in which the ruling party has suppressed the activities of opposition parties, including their ability to raise funds. Its design and methods of implementation seem to provide a better fit with the wider political context than other approaches to party support.

of assistance seek to link ideologically aligned parties, again through bilateral funding, and often with a focus on peer to peer activities like exchange visits (including the work of the *Stiftungen*).

Newer approaches include support to political parties as part of post-conflict stabilisation or social inclusion and, particularly where donor agencies provide support, expanding funding modalities to include pooled or basket funding as well as new methods such as grant-making and inter-party dialogue (Box 1 outlines an innovative model from Uganda).

The state of practice: challenges and opportunities for party support

There have been few robust evaluations of support to political parties. However, recent ODI research, funded by DFID, in Georgia, Nepal, Nigeria, Uganda and Latin America (Wild et al., 2010b), and research by others (Carothers, 2006; Erdmann, 2005), highlight flaws in some dominant models of support.

One that is particularly problematic is attempts to link ideologically aligned political parties from different regions. In Uganda, political parties are open in acknowledging that this ideological link is largely meaningless. Many Ugandan parties are vehicles for the election of leaders (rather than representing a particular ideology), reflecting the nature of the Ugandan political spectrum. This creates a lottery for which parties are supported, and highlights the problem with the assumption that there are parties with similar ideologies to be supported. In Georgia, however, this form of support was viewed more positively. Parties saw it as a useful way to link to European counterparts, particularly to open discus-

sions on EU accession, even though it might not be particularly strategic (exchange visits, for example, are valued as an opportunity to learn English).

Challenges for other models seem to surface more in the methods of implementation than in initial design. This is reflected in the continued use of blueprint approaches to implementation, involving top-down technical assistance and idealised models of 'what a political party should be'. The common use of standard training courses, workshops or exchange visits is rarely tailored to specific contextual challenges. In Uganda, for example, such courses do not, and cannot, touch on the country's key political characteristics, namely, ruling party/state fusion, the suppression of political activity, and the prevalence of political parties as vehicles for individual power.

The challenges of an overly technical approach are also apparent to some extent in Nigeria, where a joint basket fund (pooling funds from the UK, Canada, UNDP and the EU) includes support to political parties. While funders may have a clear understanding of the highly political challenges in Nigeria – including a dominant party system and ethnic, religious and regional divisions – the technical assistance they provide through the basket fund does not engage with these challenges. This is reinforced by the choice of key implementer, Nigeria's Inter-Party Advisory Council – seen by some parties as a puppet institution of the Electoral Commission and the ruling party. While funders are aware of these criticisms, they see the Council as the only available institution to channel funds, and hope for its reform. Given the difficult relations between this Council and opposition parties, this mismatch between analysis and implementation remains a problem.

Some examples of party assistance seem more effective. They suggest areas of work that may be outside the comfort zones of some actors, but are more likely to engage political parties in feasible ways. Firstly, some programmes do better in addressing the realities of the incentives and structural challenges that shape party development. In Uganda, party support provided under the Deepening Democracy Programme recognises that previous support was not very effective; that political parties want much more flexible support; and wider contextual constraints. To date, grants have been disbursed to three opposition parties, with the Forum for Democratic Change, the largest opposition party, receiving the largest amount. In the run-up to elections in 2011, this goes further than most approaches in responding to party incentives and developing a less prescriptive approach, based on strong context analysis.

Secondly, some initiatives use brokering, negotiation and high-level political engagement – an area often overlooked in discussions of political party support. In Nepal, for example, a number of policy dialogue initiatives have received support,



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involving a range of political parties. These target the constitution process or the political engagement of specific marginalised groups and grow from commitments to support Nepal's peace process. One of the most promising initiatives is support by the Norwegian Embassy for dialogue between youth groups affiliated to the main political parties (groups associated with high levels of violence in the conflict). According to interviews, this relatively low-cost approach has helped to strengthen dialogue between parties, building space to air tensions and explore cooperation.

In Georgia, the US and some European countries provide support to political parties that builds on a history of political engagement. US support has been seen as fundamental, not least in helping to maintain unity by brokering relations between key figures in the ruling party. One factor in this success seems to be targeting advice and support to key individuals and establishing specific purposes for dialogue.

Thirdly, there are examples of effective and tailored capacity development, but this requires some level of party institutionalisation. This is the case with the Christian Democrat Party in Georgia, which has capitalised on available support because it has the capacity to do so.

While party development is, ultimately, internally driven, emerging findings suggest firstly, that political parties matter and should be included by donors as a vital part of the governance 'puzzle', and secondly, that party support needs to be rethought to engage with the wider political system more effectively. The latter may require broadening out the tool box to support political parties, reworking conventional methods of capacity development, and using newer methods such as high level brokering or engagement, inter-party dialogue and grant-making. Viewing political parties as part of the governance context does not mean that party support will be appropriate in every context. A careful examination is needed of the risks, entry points and capacity to provide support to political parties in each country.

Much greater attention needs to be paid to understanding the metrics or criteria for success. This has been severely neglected to date. Recognising the extent to which political parties are embedded in wider political systems implies recognising the existing baseline for political parties in a given context and identifying feasible areas of reform. This will differ in each country. In Nepal, success might mean increasing inter-party dialogue between previously warring parties. In Uganda it might mean signs of weakening state-party fusion or the growing ability of opposition parties to campaign and organise. Support to political parties needs to be part of a wider strategy of political engagement, and criteria for success may need to be explicit about political aims.

Finally, rethinking approaches to political parties in developing and transition countries means identifying complementary areas between diplomatic and development actors, moving beyond the typical division of labour between political and technical/developmental roles.

In Nepal, the UK's Joint Strategy has built strong links between DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence on governance and security issues, ensuring greater crossover. Similarly in Georgia, the US Embassy and USAID consult each other on these issues. In other countries, donor agencies, in particular, may still prefer to focus on technical assistance and their relationships with government counterparts. However, examples such as the donor-funded Deepening Democracy Programmes in Uganda and Nigeria are attempts to address political challenges through development support. As in Uganda, these programmes can benefit from the involvement of diplomatic actors with skills in political engagement.

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References and useful resources

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Useful resources:

- For more information on ODI's work on support to political parties, visit: <http://bit.ly/gCDZT2>
- For more information on ODI's work on politics and governance, visit: <http://bit.ly/fgb990>

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