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**Plenary Session I: Defending Democratic Institutions and Spaces from  
Authoritarian Encroachments**

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**Defending Democratic Institutions and Spaces from Authoritarian Encroachment – The  
Role of Political Parties**

There are many ways in which we can address this theme and I know that some of the other speakers will likely do that. For me I would like to use these few moments in my opening remarks to focus on the role of political parties. I am doing this in part because this has been something that I have devoted most of my life to and also because as political party leaders and representatives of political parties we all have a responsibility to explore what we can do better both individually and collectively.

Political parties are essential institutions of democracy. By competing in elections parties offer citizens a choice in governance, and while in opposition they can hold governments accountable. When citizens join political parties, volunteer their time, donate money and vote for their leaders, they are exercising their basic democratic rights. Participation of citizens in political parties offers unique benefits, including opportunities to influence policy choices, choose and engage political leaders, and run for office.

When Political parties fail or are in disarray democracy suffers. Hugo Chavez once famously said that he was not the cause of the problem but rather he was the result.

**- The challenges facing parties:**

Political parties have never very popular entities but more recently they are further challenged by:

- . An increasingly disconnected and disillusioned citizenry.
- . Party membership diminishing and less important than citizen engagement.
- . The blurring of ideology in mainstream parties.
- . A 24-hour media cycle that is now global and feeds the frenzy.

- . Technology and social media that has revolutionized communication, civic engagement and citizen mobilization at every level.
- . The increasing influence of disinformation in political discourse.
- . The rise in anti-establishment and populist movements who are tapping into this disillusionment and anger.

More than a year ago NDI launched the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Parties program. An initiative of political party reform to equip parties for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Political Parties in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Political parties in the 21<sup>st</sup> century face several existential challenges, including:

- » Why do increasingly disenfranchised citizens not see party activism as a mechanism to give voice to their concerns?
- » How do parties with developed ideologies, platforms, programs and a history of being change makers compete against the rise of populist movements, many of which are propelled by single issues?
- » Given citizen disenfranchisement with traditional parties, how can they raise legitimate resources to continue their operations?
- » How can political parties keep up with changing citizen expectations, with regard to communication and outreach?
- » How can political parties reflect a commitment to women's empowerment through their policy goals, organizational culture and institutional structures?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Nor are there "one size fits all" prescriptions or techniques.

Resolving domestic political conflicts and responding to changing geopolitics requires strong democratic institutions that can mediate partisanship, ensure minority rights, uphold the rule of law, and, in so doing, stem the appeal of populists and extremists. Political parties need to become more responsive to citizens' needs and to create opportunities for multi-partisan and multi-ethnic consensus.

This initiative came up with a number of recommendations to help reform-minded party leaders think through their own challenges and concepts to address these challenges:

- » Successful political actors and leaders reflect and give voice to the concerns of the electorate.
- » A professionalization of political activism has squeezed out amateur activists, who turn to micro issues or join populist or protest movements to find or regain their voice.

- » Political activism can be encouraged through increased capacity and meaningful engagement.
- » Innovation of party structures and internal procedures accommodates technological and social change, and can make parties more attractive to potential support.
- » Restoring parties as trusted institutions in the information age requires higher levels of transparency and accountability.
- » Public dialogue and civic education, and in many cases, internal party reform, are needed to restore the preeminent place of parties in democracy.
- » Ideology remains important, however many citizens argue that most traditional parties are too similar and no longer represent the unique ideologies or values for which they once campaigned. To fill this void, new citizen movements and parties often propose alternatives that are not framed in the traditional language of ideology.
- » Diverse representation and participation by marginalized groups is crucial for political parties
- » The promotion and empowerment of women, including young women, by and within political parties is crucial for the long term success of these organizations. Political party reform cannot be fully achieved without this.

Mainstream political parties the world over struggle in this modern era of a more active citizenry, technological advances in communication, the 24 hour news cycle and the rise in populism and anti-establishment sentiment. Political leaders have a huge responsibility to continue to evolve and reform to address these challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There are many facets to the current challenges being experienced by democracies around the world. Democracy need to deliver. In the words of Madeleine Albright, Chairman of NDI “Citizens want to vote and eat”. They need to feel that the political system represents them and is responsive to their needs.