



I D E A C o n f e r e n c e :

The State of Political Parties in South Asia

Introduction

A two day conference on the challenges facing political parties is envisioned to commemorate the launch of the South Asia Political Parties Regional Report entitled *Political Parties in South Asia: The Challenge of Change*. The report provides a comparative view of the condition, role and functioning of political parties in five countries of the South Asian region – Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It presents a summary of the knowledge on South Asia's party domain presently available in social research, builds on the empirical information collected from 50 parties, develops "self-portraits" of political parties through interviews with party leaders, identifies the challenges parties face, and suggests paths for the future. The report represents a systematic effort to build knowledge on the environment in which inter-party competition is conducted, on the external regulations that shape parties and party systems, and on intra-party functioning. The themes of conference will largely mirror the themes covered in the report.

The conference is to be held in Nepal from 21-22 March, 2007. The aim is to gather politicians and specialists who study political parties from the region to bring their perspectives on these issues in Nepal at time when political parties have emerged as key actors in the peace process. Hence there will also be a special panel on Nepal. This meeting will provide Nepalese political party leaders and members a peer-learning opportunity as well as networking. In addition, the Nepali experience could also provide feedback to those from the region about how political parties can play a key role in the resolution of conflict and peace building. Additionally such a conference will also lend publicity to the regional report and help launch the Nepal country project and initiate discussion on how the constitution reform is integrally linked with the political party reform.

Conference Objectives

- Provide a platform to discuss IDEA's work on political parties in South Asia.
- To enable individuals involved with political parties to share best practice, stimulate partnerships and to provide intellectual cross-fertilization.
- To identify strategies and tools to advance the capacity of political parties in the region.

- To bring regional expertise to Nepal in order for Nepalese political parties to benefit from partnerships, discussions and to share IDEA's experience in Nepal.

Target Audience

The conference is aimed at political parties, scholars, policy makers, media, civil society and democracy assistance organizations working in South Asia.

Conference Themes

- **Changing party system: The Emergence of Multi-Party System.**
In South Asia there is a trend that is moving towards a multi-party system. In this context, what is the role and place of ruling and opposition parties in South Asian democracies? What are the challenges in the region for parties to work with other parties and share power? Can political parties work together for strengthening democracy? Can coalitions work?
- **Reforms in the Party Domain: Proposals and Possibilities?**
The legal framework is seen as necessary for possible party reforms. For example, issues such as leadership selection and removal, candidate selection, mechanisms for dispute resolution within parties, funding, etc. However, should such a legal framework be embedded in national law or should they be left to party constitutions? What are the challenges in this area?
- **Institutionalisation of Parties: Party Organisation and Internal Democracy**
Parties became organisationally weak and heavily dependent on single leaders. Often parties split, reunite or wither away. Unless parties are institutionalised, long-term identification of people with parties will not develop, which is essential for the stability of democracy. They have to survive beyond the life span of the founding leader and transcend the leader in his/her life time. What are the challenges of institutionalisation for parties?
- **New types of parties: Minority, Ethnic and Regional Parties**
The political landscape has shifted from ideologically based parties (left-right spectrum) to the emergence of new type of parties based on religion, ethnicity, nationalism and egalitarianism. But people differ on the merits and disadvantages of the increase of ethnic and religious minority parties. What is the state of such emerging parties in South Asia and what is their impact on the political scene?
- **Nepali Political Parties: The Politics of Cooperation**
The panel will bring political parties of all persuasions in Nepal to discuss the role of political parties in fostering the peace deal and democracy in general. It will map out the challenges facing Nepalese political parties and how the constitution building process might shape the nature of political party competition.
- **Way Forward: Building Capacity for Political Parties**
Presently how are political parties in the region addressing the issue of capacity building? What kind of capacity building initiatives are priorities for political parties in South Asia and Nepal? What kind of role can the international community play in this regard?