

Regional Conference

**'Political Parties and Democratic Consolidation in West Africa'
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Introduction by

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a profound privilege to address a gathering that brings together so many excellencies in one room. Distinguished personalities who play such eminent roles in the political developments of the West-African countries present and within your region. At the beginning of this introduction I like to congratulate the Ghanaian political parties and the Ghanaian Institute for Economic Affairs for organizing and hosting this first meeting of major political parties from countries in West-Africa.

What is the context in which this meeting takes place?

The report on the State of Governance and Democracy in West Africa prepared for this conference, speaks of ECOWAS countries being marked by a rather chequered post-Independence political history. Wole Soyinka, the eminent African author and Nobel laureate writes about this period in his latest book, titled, *You must set forth at dawn*. He records how happy he was as a young man exploring Nigeria by road but than draws a gloomy smile and writes:

“In the road’s later decay...is recorded a nation’s retreat from a humanism that I had imbibed, quite unconsciously, from childhood. I was fated to watch the nation turn both carrion and scavenger as it killed and consumed its kind.”

Soyinka has the courage to speak up and put his experience into valuable prose and to record the post-independent era as he undergoes it. For those who like and admire his books - - and as political leaders we may not always appreciate the mirror he is holding up - - he is the embodiment of the fact that the struggle for justice and democracy can be fought and that it can be won also.

The report prepared for this conference comes to the positive assessment that, with the possible exception of Cote d’Ivoire, the region is on the brink of entering a new era in its political evolution in which multiparty democracy has been enshrined within the constitutions, with regular elections held for the presidency and parliaments, with space for the opposition to play its role, with an independent judiciary based on the rule of law, with human rights protected and with free and plural media.

In this regard, the initiative to bring together the political leadership from countries in the region is very timely because this new phase in the political history of the region requires true and courageous leadership of those in government and in opposition. The transition to democracy and the consolidation thereof, is still unevenly spread within the region and, therefore, remains still fragile. Establishing

platforms for cooperation and reflection amongst the political leadership from across the political spectrum can only help to build on this historic momentum and prevent it from slipping through our fingers.

Last week I had the opportunity to meet with former President Ben Mkapa of Tanzania discussing the state of democratic development in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this encounter he mentioned that one of the biggest obstacles to democratic development and stability in Africa is *the lack of trust amongst the political parties. Dialogue is the key instrument to resolve this obstacle.* I am sure he would have rejoiced knowing that today political parties from West Africa are meeting to consider the state of Governance and Democracy within West Africa and discuss ways for cooperation to advance democracy.

That the Ghanaian political parties have taken the initiative for this meeting can be no coincidence. This year Ghana celebrates its 50th Independence anniversary. Other countries in the region gained their independence soon thereafter and will be celebrating their 50th anniversary in the coming years. Historically, Ghana's independence became the beacon of a free and democratic Africa that went through a rough period in its post-independent years.

Former President Chissano of Mozambique, who was also present at the meeting with president Mkapa, reminded us that the independence struggle was a struggle for democracy. Reflecting on the difficult post-independent period, he observed that many countries did not have the luxury at that time to choose their own democratic development because the Cold War limited their choices and imposed models, particular one-party systems that did not serve development well. However, he mentioned that in today's international context, the leadership in Africa has more time to think and to invest in building multiparty democracy. If that is true, the emerging cooperation of political parties in West Africa can play a role in facilitating that reflection, creating trust among political leaders and among the leaders and their people.

In 2003, the political parties in Ghana decided to work together to consolidate multiparty democracy in Ghana and to ensure that it provides the stability that is necessary for social and economic development. The Chairmen of the political parties meet regularly in the Chairmen caucus to consider matters of national importance and to address flash points before they can turn into conflicts; the Secretaries General meet regularly to oversee the implementation of their joint action programme and an Advisory Board of Ghanaian elders, representative for the wider civil and traditional society, advises the political parties about the priorities and the way they are implemented. This corporation has started to change political interaction in Ghana. Politicians who are debating issues and not only fight each other for gaining power, who are collectively concerned and responsible for the well-being and cohesion of the country, who not only work in

the capital but also reach out to the districts, introduce a new and welcome development in the democratic culture and practice. The initiative of the political parties helped a great deal in passing the 2003 general elections peacefully and smoothly, a great compliment for all stakeholders involved.

The cooperation has evolved to the point that the political parties are preparing the launch of a Democratic Consolidation Strategy Paper in which they analyze the gaps in the democratic state of affairs in Ghana and set an agenda with priorities to address these democracy gaps. I believe that it is the first time that political parties themselves have taken the initiative to develop such a political reform strategy paper which in future could become a welcome complement to the poverty reduction strategy papers. It is a sign of political parties asserting their responsibility for the political developments within their country.

It is entirely consistent with the provision within the Ghanaian constitution which I have not found in many other constitutions. Article 55 of the Ghanaian constitution imposes the obligation on political parties to play a central role in upholding multiparty democracy, national unity and inter-ethnic/regional tolerance. This is combined with the Political Party Law of Ghana, which seeks to realize these ambitions by demanding the widespread national presence (maintaining offices in 2/3 of the Districts) of any political party if it is to qualify and maintain its status as a registered party.

I am very pleased that the political parties in Mali have also developed their platform for cooperation to facilitate the consolidation of Mali's democracy and I like to congratulate the Malian political parties and their supporting structures with this step in the political evolution in their country. Both the Ghanaian and Malian experiences may have value for the transition processes of other countries in the region.

Why is it important that political parties take these initiatives, that political parties take responsibility for making their democracy function and making them deliver the stability that is needed for sustainable development?

We used to believe that countries should first develop economically before they would be fit for multiparty democracy. However, research data now show that low-income democracies and democratizing countries have outperformed their authoritarian counterparts during the past 40 years on a whole range of development indicators. Whether we consider life expectancy, literacy, access to clean drinking water, agricultural productivity or infant mortality, democracies at all income levels have typically achieved results that are outperforming those of autocracies by 20 to 40 percent. 95% of the worst economic performers over the past 40 years were overseen by non-democratic governments. Virtually all contemporary refugee crises have been wrought by autocratic governments.

Political parties are the core intermediary institutions in representative democracies which aggregate the demands of society, translate these demands in policy options and mediate these policy options between society and the state. Well functioning political parties offer citizens the opportunity to participate in and to contribute to the political process. And very importantly, political parties select the political leadership. Finally, they play a vital role in the electoral process for public office.

Today, most of these important functions are not fulfilled for the reasons as explained in the document prepared for this conference, notably the lack of financial resources, the lack of clear policy platforms and the lack of transparency in decision-making. If we want stable democratic systems of governance, we have no choice but to address the current weaknesses in how political parties function. And by the way, these weaknesses are certainly not confined or particular to the African continent. The political system in established democracies, including the country I reside in, The Netherlands, is also facing challenging questions about the performance and relevance of our political parties

Marginalizing or neglecting the role of political parties and the intermediary function they ought to play, gives way to populist leadership who usually believe that they can do without political parties.

In this regard it is regrettable that within agenda's to improve governance and within international development assistance programmes, the role of political parties have mostly been missing. Much emphasis is given to the development of state institutions and the development of civil society, but what is connecting the two, what we refer to as political society, has been and continues to be overlooked. That's why, in my opinion, this meeting is so important because it tries to restore the primacy of politics in the development of the democratic system.

That system is the responsibility of all political parties, not only the governing parties. All our parties have an interest in that process and have a responsibility to develop jointly a consensus about the rules by which we practice the political process and a responsibility for the institutional development of the key institutions that make up the democratic architecture of our countries, including our political parties. Let me emphasize that we are all stakeholders in the foundations on which democracy functions and for maintaining the roof under which we practice it. If we fail to do so, the building will collapse with all the tragic consequences for the people who we are supposed to serve. As Kofi Anan recently stated: *no nation is born a democracy*. It requires concerted effort to build whilst it needs permanent maintenance as well.

Perhaps we have been too single-mindedly focused on the competitive dimension of democracy as exemplified by the attention for elections. Obviously, elections

are key moments in the democratic process and much unnecessary violence results from electoral processes that are not managed fairly. However, we have tended to neglect other dimensions of democracy such as accommodating conflicts of interest peacefully and reconciling past differences. Consolidating democracy means moving coherently forward on all the different dimensions of democracy. For that purpose, the production of democratic consolidation strategy papers could become important and useful instruments in future.

It is in this spirit that I hope that the meeting will discuss common interests and priorities to act upon. That the envisaged cooperation will offer a platform for reflection, for sharing of information and best practices in making democracy work and deliver.

What is IMD's role in this process?

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, if democracy is to be sustainable, it has to be a home grown. What can be done by outsiders such as IMD is to facilitate processes of dialogue and the sharing of information and lessons learned. Inviting politicians and political parties to engage each other in analyzing the current systems and procedures and to find common ways forward by crafting long-term agendas for consolidating democracy.

IMD itself is still a young organization that was established in 2001. It is made up of representatives of seven political parties represented in Dutch Parliament, including three parties in government and four parties in opposition. Some of the parties are big and some are small. They came together in IMD realizing that they should not export their ideologies but offer a collective platform for partnership with political parties in young democracies that are working to entrench their multiparty systems and the institutional development of their political parties. That's why we state that IMD is an organization *of* political parties *for* political parties. That we are partners in democracy. It implies that our cooperation is essentially a political cooperation that is delivered on a strictly impartial basis.

Since its inception, IMD has established programs in sixteen countries, and cooperates with a total of 152 political parties on the African continent, Latin America, Asia and in the Caucasus. We recognize that democracy is a long-term process, hence IMD prefers to provide programme rather than project support and, when the partnership matures, to commit itself to multi-annual periods. Besides *country* programs, a *regional* program was established in Southern and Eastern Africa in 2004, when 36 political parties from six countries (Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia) decided to embark on a set of cooperation initiatives.

Through this partnership IMD hopes to contribute to three objectives:

- 1) the improvement of the performance of multiparty democracy through inter-party dialogues and support for locally crafted reform agendas;
- 2) the advancement of the institutional development of political parties; and
- 3) the establishment of constructive relations between political parties (political society) and civil society.

We hope to extend this partnership in future to the regional cooperation of political parties in your region as well.

Allow me to end this introduction by quoting a lesson of one of the great African statesman, Nelson Mandela, a lesson that is guiding our work and may provide inspiration for the cooperation among political parties in West Africa which we shall be discussing at this conference. That lesson is: *If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.*

Thank you very much!