Pan-African Conference

'Fifty Years of Sub-Saharan African Independence
and the Role of Political Parties:
Promise, Decline and Resurgence'
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Introduction by
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Introduction

It is a profound privilege to address a gathering that brings together so many eminent politicians from across Sub-Saharan Africa in one room.

At the beginning of this introduction, I like to sincerely congratulate the Ghanaian political parties and the Ghanaian Institute for Economic Affairs for organizing and hosting this first meeting of major political parties from across Africa to set the democratic compass for the years to come.

The occasion is an auspicious one, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Ghanaian independence, a milestone in the contemporary political history of the African continent. On that momentous day, March 7th , 1957, Nkrumah - with tears streaming down his face - spoke of the moment of freedom that had arrived, proclaiming that: *'Today, from now on, there is a new Africa in the world'*. Few other countries were launched with so much promise for the future than Ghana.

That day, Nkrumah also reaffirmed his wider African agenda by stating: *'Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent.'* That goal was achieved when apartheid was finally defeated in 1994 and South Africans voted *en masse* for a constitution based on multiparty democracy. The presence today of so many representatives of political parties of democratically governed countries from Sub-Sahara Africa can be seen as a tribute to the vision and dedication with which Nkrumah pursued the African agenda and to the government, political parties and people of Ghana for guiding, once again, in the pursuit of the consolidation of multi-party democracy on the African continent.

At a conference for the political parties in West Africa convened in Accra last year, the Ghanaian Vice President Mahama delivering the key-note address, noted that '*democracy is in the air*' and that '*if anybody should catch any infection during their stay in Ghana, it would certainly be democracy*'. I guess, most if not all of you are infected with democracy, the reason that you are here. But when looking ahead at the next 50 years, how can one make democracy perform better to ensure that violent conflicts are prevented on the African continent and that the Millennium Development Goals shall be met. In fact, how can Africa also be liberated from the scourge of endemic violence and poverty?

What is the role of political parties in addressing this key question? But before turning to this question, let me first underline the importance of democracy for ending violent conflict and for creating the conditions for stability on which durable socio-economic development can be realized.

We used to believe that countries should first develop economically before they would be fit for multiparty democracy. However, 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.

Why do democratizing countries outperform their authoritarian counterparts? Democratically governed countries tend to ensure a more inclusive representation of the diverse population interests compared to their authoritarian counterparts, tend to be more accountable to their populations and, hence, are more sensitive to the interests of their people and, finally, tend to respect the rule of law and the separation of powers more strictly. Representation or inclusivity, accountability and separation of powers are key dimensions for democratic dispensations that enhance the legitimacy of governments and hence reduce the reasons for violent conflict.

Often, dictatorships are said to maintain stability by repressing tribal, ethnic or political dissent. This has proven incorrect also. Of the forty-nine poor countries embroiled in civil conflict in the 1990s, forty-one were dictatorships. Democracies appear to be especially good at managing ethnic diversity – they use ballots instead of bullets. And, there is a powerful pattern of "democratic peace" – democracies rarely go to war with each other.

The value of democracy was recently well summarized by the former UN Secretary General, the distinguished Kofi Anan, when he stated on October 30th, 2006: "…*democracy is a universal right that does not belong to any country or region, and that participatory governance, based on the will of the people, is the best path to freedom, growth and development.*"

The importance of democracy was recently codified by the Heads of State and governments of the African Union with the adoption on January 30th, 2007 the *AFRICAN CHARTER ON DEMOCRACY, ELECTIONS AND GOVERNANCE.* The Charter lays down the normative and institutional standards for the member states of the African Union and should become the

reference document for all people on the continent working towards the consolidation of democracy, ending violent conflict and poverty.

Allow me to quote one article from this African Union Charter, namely article 13 under Chapter 5 on The Culture of Democracy and Peace. The article reads: *"State parties shall take measures to ensure and maintain political and social dialogue, as well as public trust and transparency between political leaders and the people, in order to consolidate democracy and peace."* The importance of this article was underlined by former President of Tanzania Benjamin Mkapa, when he emphasized in a discussion last year that one of the biggest obstacles to democratic development and stability in Africa today, is the lack of trust amongst the political parties. To overcome this deficit in trust, dialogue is the key instrument to resolve this obstacle.

Dialogue, creating trust among political leaders and between the people and political parties, are the essential ingredients of the cooperation between the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), which I represent today, and the political parties present at this conference. The NIMD was established by 7 political parties in The Netherlands - of which 3 form the government and 4 are in opposition – some are big and others are small – on the understanding that supporting democracy does not mean the export of models or ideologies, but that a joint platform for partnership was required for cooperation with political parties in young democracies which are engaged in entrenching their multiparty systems and in the institutional development of their political parties.

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, these important functions are either partially or not fulfilled – by political parties the world all over, not just on the African continent alone - for reasons such as 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 and party systems function.

It is for this reason that the NIMD partnership focuses on three main 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.

The example of the inter-party cooperation in The Netherlands to provide a platform for dialogue and cooperation with political parties has already inspired political parties in 7 African countries to establish similar platforms or are in the process of establishing such platforms. It is very encouraging to note that this inter-party cooperation is indeed contributing towards greater trust among leaders of political parties and also to significant initiatives towards the consolidation of multiparty systems and peace on the continent. Let me highlight a few of the very positive developments:

Earlier this week, the Board of the Zambian Center for Inter-party Dialogue met with President Levy Mwanawasa of Zambia and with the opposition leader. They both confirmed that they will participate in a Summit of political parties presidents facilitated by the Zambian Center to iron out the roadmap for the constitutional reform process in Zambia and to some critical and contentious issues in the draft Constitutions. They expect the Zambian Center to drive this crucial political process.

The Kenyan Center for Multiparty Democracy has been requested to play a mediating role in the unfolding constitutional process in their country and are working hard to find consensus about a number of essential constitutional reforms before the start of the electoral campaign later this year. CMD-Kenya is also playing a major role in increasing the number of women and youth to stand for the forthcoming elections in Kenya.

In the recent debate on the State of the Nation in the South African parliament, President Thabo Mbeki welcomed the establishment of an inter-party platform, *a national process, to take up issues on which political parties should act in partnership, inspired by a common patriotism that would enable us to build the cross-party partnership that would be united by a voluntary national consensus.* He suggested three topics for this national process: social transformation, the eradication of poverty and the reduction and eradication of crime. Soon after this conference ends, I know that the South African parties will commence their inter-party dialogue on the subject of crime.

The inter-party cooperation in Mali has lead to increased contact between political leaders, non-governmental organisations and the general population jointly discussing popular needs in the run-up to the recent elections. It also resulted in more than 1500 well trained party observers who monitored the elections. In

addition, the political parties established a code of conduct in which they reaffirm, amongst others, to address electoral disputes through legal channels.

The political parties in Ghana decided in 2003 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 as our Ghanaian counterparts present can inform us about.

The inter-party cooperation in Ghana 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 positive sign of political parties asserting their responsibility for the political developments within their country.

Time does not allow me to mention all the important activities which are undertaken by the political parties present at this conference. Today I wanted to highlight some of the activities to illustrate the potential role political parties can and – in my opinion – should play in deepening democracy, contribution to peace

and to development. It are the political parties and their leaders that either make democracy work or fail. That's why so important for political parties to meet and to share experiences, 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.

This is the first time the political parties who constitute the East and Southern African Regional Political Platform meet with the political parties working together in the West Africa Regional Platform. The 50th anniversary of the Ghanaian independence and its symbolic significance for the whole of Sub-Sahara Africa, has been a timely and welcome occasion to build the bridge between the two African networks and provide the opportunity for this meeting.

As we all know the transformation to democracy has proven, and in some countries is proving, to be a difficult and complex process. As President Nelson Mandela wrote in his biography: '*After climbing a great hill* (the hill of defeating apartheid and establishing democracy he was referring to*), one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.*'

By sharing lessons and by encouraging each other as peers, I hope that this cooperation will help in climbing the many hills of peaceful reform processes in order to entrench multiparty democracy and thereby creating the conditions for peace and development. Only by taking responsibility ourselves for making democracy work in the benefit of all the people on whose behalf we are serving, will political parties be able to gain the respect and trust of our populations.

To conclude, I sincerely hope that the political party leaders assembled at this special occasion will chart the course of democratic transformation and consolidation on your continent for the next 50 years, building on the principles as laid down in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. Hopefully, your deliberations in the coming days will result in an agenda on how to meet these challenges. To quote Mohandas Ghandi: *The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems.* Let the spirit of these words guide your discussions and actions!

The political parties of The Netherlands that constitute the NIMD look forward to remaining your partners in this process. Thank you very much.

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