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USAID Political Party Assistance Policy

Role of Political Parties in Democracy

Competitive political parties are central to any democracy. They perform a number of functions that, in combination, distinguish them from any other civic or social organization. They recruit and nominate candidates for elected office with the intent to govern. In the process, they develop positions on issues of public concern, stimulate public discourse, and formulate governing platforms during election campaigns. After an election, parties form either the government or the opposition. Governing requires a different set of capabilities to translate electoral platforms into performance. The credibility and legitimacy of political parties in the public mind rest primarily on performance while in office rather than on election campaigns.

The United States Interest

The spread of stable democratic governments is in the long-term interest of the United States. Assistance in strengthening political parties—both in government and in opposition—is one important way that the United States can support its friends and allies who are engaged in democratization in developing and transitional societies. Moreover, political party assistance provides an important means to engage a nation's future leadership, a factor often key to advancing U.S. interests over time. For these reasons, the U.S. Government encourages assistance to democratic political parties.

GOALS of USAID Political Party Assistance

The goals of USAID's political party assistance are to:

- Develop and consolidate representative democracies,
- Develop transparent political environments,
- Establish viable democratic parties, and
- Ensure conduct of free and fair elections.

Policy

Political party assistance is a new USAID policy priority, one that requires commitment and innovation. This policy defines a political party as any entity that competes for elected office, whether a political movement, party, electoral coalition, or alliance. The policy also applies to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that operate as de facto political parties.

Two principles govern USAID's political party assistance policy:

- USAID programs support representative, multiparty systems; and
- USAID programs do not seek to determine election outcomes.

From these principles flow the following guidelines. When it serves U.S. foreign policy interests, however, these guidelines may be waived.

- USAID programs must make a good faith effort to assist *all democratic* parties with equitable levels of assistance. Assistance to non-democratic parties is prohibited. Where there are too many democratic political parties to assist all effectively, USAID will assist *all significant* democratic parties. The relevant U.S. Government Mission will determine which parties are significant.
- Commodity support valued at \$50,000 or less may be provided annually to each political party that qualifies for assistance.
- Political party assistance should be suspended for a reasonable time period prior to voting. Thirty days is a usual period, but it will vary depending upon the lead-time before an election.

Prohibited activities linked to influencing election outcomes that would require a waiver include

- Offering assistance to only one political candidate, party, or electoral coalition;
- Providing commodity support valued over \$50,000 to any individual party;
- Providing cash grants to any political party;
- Paying salaries, wages, fees, or honoraria to any candidate, political party leader, or campaign official during a campaign period;
- Paying for private polls for only one party or candidate;
- Organizing public meetings that endorse or feature only one candidate or political party;
- Paying for a media message that specifically endorses or supports one candidate or political party; and
- Making payments to individuals with the intention of influencing votes.

Policy Exceptions

Washington concurrence is required for activities deviating from this policy that use Economic Support Funds (ESF), Freedom Support Act (FSA), Assistance for Eastern European and Baltic States (AEEB), and Transition Initiative (TI) funds. No waiver is possible, however, for use of Development Assistance (DA) funds.

To obtain a waiver, an Action Memorandum must be submitted to the USAID Administrator for approval. The Action Memorandum may be drafted by USAID (in Washington or in the field), the State Department (in Washington or in the field), or by the National Security Council. The Action Memorandum must be cleared by State and USAID regional bureaus, State's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, USAID's Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, USAID's Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination, and USAID's Office of the General Counsel.

The Action Memorandum must identify and provide a rationale for the specific aspects of the policy to be waived. It must also describe the proposed program and how it will be implemented, and explain how the proposed deviation is consistent with U.S. Government policy in the country in question.

Concurrence must be obtained before funds are obligated. All practicable steps will be taken to ensure that the waiver process does not exceed two weeks. A waiver to support a single democratic electoral coalition will require a particularly rapid decision, and for this reason, a decision against such assistance must be made by Washington within two weeks of receipt.

Implementation Guidance

USAID's Political Party Assistance Policy sets forth the principles that govern the Agency's engagement in the field. This implementation guidance is designed to help USAID staff and decisionmakers in Washington and the field

- Determine if a program is subject to the policy,
- Define key terms used in the policy, and
- Elaborate standards that must be met if seeking a waiver to the policy.

Which Programs Are Subject to USAID Political Party Assistance Policy?

Direct political party assistance programs are subject to the policy. Also subject to the policy are assistance programs that indirectly benefit political parties, including—but not limited to—media assistance, get-out-the-vote programs, public opinion polling, and voter education activities. All such programs must adhere to the principle of supporting representative, multiparty systems, and must not determine election outcomes.

How Should USAID Determine whether a Political Party is “Democratic”?

This judgment should be based on party actions, taken while either in government or in the opposition, within a time frame appropriate to the evolving conditions within a country. Other evidence that could be used includes written materials, such as party platforms and propaganda; broadcast messages, such as television and radio commercials; and interviews with party leaders.

Key indicators of a political party's democratic credentials include

- Support for peaceful, democratic means to obtain power
 - o Does the political party eschew the use of violence to overthrow democratic institutions in practice as well as in policy?
 - o If it endorsed or sponsored violence in the past, has it renounced these practices and broken ties to violent groups or organizations?
 - o Does the political party accept competitive elections?

- Respect for human rights and the rule of law
 - o Does the political party reject the use of political terror, unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture against political opponents in practice as well as in theory?
 - o Does the political party obey the laws of the country?
 - o Has or would the political party adhere to legal decisions rendered (recognizing that it is not uncommon for democratic political parties to be involved in legal action)?

- Respect for freedom of religion, press, speech, and association
 - o Does the political party campaign or take actions to restrict or constrain the independence of religious institutions and/or free and independent media that are not engaged in or espouse militant extremism?
 - o Has the party taken action to undermine freedom of expression or association to restrict political opposition?

Many political parties in countries where USAID works fall somewhere between fully democratic and nondemocratic. In the interest of inclusiveness, parties making a good faith reform effort should be eligible for assistance. Antidemocratic parties are ineligible for assistance.

How Should USAID Determine If a Political Party is “Significant”?

Where there are a large number of political parties, providing assistance to them all may not be practical or cost-effective. Moreover, in such an environment, support for all parties could encourage a fractured political system. Determining whether a democratic political party is, or has the potential to become, an important force within the political system and therefore “significant” is a judgment to be made by the U.S. Mission. The judgment should be based on transparent, objective evidence, such as national and local election results, opinion poll results, and/or demographic data. Criteria to determine whether a democratic political party is significant include

- The size of the party's base of support compared with other democratic political parties
 - o Do polls, political analysis, or other objective information show that the party is or has the potential to gain seats in local, regional, or national legislatures?
- The level of success in previous elections compared with other political parties
 - o Is the number of votes won nationally or regionally by the party high relative to other parties?
 - o Is the party currently seated in national, regional or local government?
 - o What is its representational strength in national, regional, or local government relative to other parties?
- The potential for future success
 - o Does the party represent a formerly unrepresented but important group?
 - o Does the political party's leadership have a history of mobilizing substantial numbers of people or resources?
 - o Having met other criteria noted above, could political party assistance help a party gain a sizeable share of seats in local, regional, or national legislatures according to objective analysis?

What Standards Must Be Met when Seeking a Waiver of the Policy?

Waivers should be the exception and must meet certain standards to justify

- Excluding a significant democratic party,
- Including a non- or anti-democratic party, or
- Supporting a single democratic party or coalition.

While it is impossible to anticipate every eventuality, the following examples from the past would merit a waiver from the policy:

- Reasons for excluding a democratic political party
 - o *The party represents a danger to particular populations or nations.* "Democratic" political parties may also be xenophobic, exclusionary, radically anti-American, or involved in illegal practices (e.g., narcotrafficking). Waivers to exclude democratic political parties on these grounds, if supported with substantial evidence, will be favorably considered.
- Reasons to include a nondemocratic political party
 - o *Exclusion would place democratic parties and USAID implementers at risk.* If by excluding the nondemocratic party, it is impossible to assist democratic political parties without putting them and implementers at risk, inclusion may be justified.

However, in such cases, the Mission should carefully consider whether assistance in this environment is warranted at all.

- o *There is evidence that the nondemocratic party may reform through assistance.* If there is a strong likelihood that democratic reformers within the party will use assistance to reform the party and, as a result, the party becomes democratic within the program period, then assistance may be merited if supported with substantial evidence.
- Reasons to support a single democratic party or coalition
 - o *Fragmenting assistance may undermine democracy goals.* Competition is essential to democracy. However, in a strict authoritarian system, a fragmented opposition may be counterproductive to democracy goals. Thus, an appropriate response may be to assist democratic parties in their efforts to establish a new coalition.

The USAID Political Party Development Assistance Handbook provides additional information on technical assistance.

<http://www.usaid.gov/democracy/pdfs/pnace500.pdf>