



## **ASEF/HSF/International IDEA project on “Political Parties and the Citizens”**

### **Annex A to Call for Papers: Terms of Reference**

#### **I. Introduction**

1. Political parties are important democratic institutions that allow citizens both political participation and representation, which are among the key expressions of democracy. The premise is that democracy implies popular control over decision making and the equality among citizens in the exercise of that control. This popular control is fulfilled through political participation and representation in democratic institutions and processes where each citizen has the equal right and opportunity to engage and contribute regardless of class or caste, age, gender, identity/expression, ability, geography, ethnic, linguistic or religious background.

2. In a political party that applies democratic principles to its own procedures and practices, citizens can participate and contribute to decision making processes; engage in advocacy and lobbying; and provide checks and balances through party structures, membership, communication channels and outreach procedures. Members of the political party can also elect their representatives to leadership positions at different levels of the party.

3. Political parties are also the primary avenue through which candidates for various levels of public office are nominated. In this case, members of the political party could be chosen to run for public office and thereby when elected become public officials. In parliament, political parties formulate and vote on public policies. In this sense, political parties are one of the key drivers of reform in a democracy.

4. While playing a critical role in electoral democracies, today political parties are, however, increasingly regarded as the weakest link of democracy and no longer regarded as the only engine of democratic processes. Even though there are many important exceptions of well-functioning parties, more and more people voice concerns that parties take on the role of election machineries primarily, lacking strong democratically functioning structures and procedures leading to the inclusion of diverse groups and insufficiently representing policy alternatives. Parties are sometimes seen as being oriented around certain personalities or clan/ethnic/regional/religious group-oriented, have gender imbalances and not able to represent society. In various countries, they are perceived to spend too much time on in-fighting and competition and too little on cooperation, solving the country's problems and responding to the interests and the needs of the people.



5. These perceived shortcomings by political parties allow other actors in a polity to play a more political and catalytic role. These actors include, among others, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and citizen movements, which can be vehicles for public engagement in political issues and thereby, influence politics. In situations where political parties are not trusted or perceived as a hindrance to change, some citizens turn their backs on political parties and join these other actors to address their political needs.

6. In recent years and largely due to advances in telecommunications and the social media, citizen movements have emerged as alternatives to political party membership for citizen participation in democratic decision making processes. Diverse groups of citizens, often with high numbers of youth, have made an increasing impact on democratic processes in both Asia and Europe, the two regions that ASEF, HSF and International IDEA all are active in. Examples of these are the Occupy Wall Street movements and Green movements in Europe and social media-led movements in such countries as India and Indonesia. These citizen movements meet on ad-hoc bases and converge around individual issues, often sparked by public outrage over societal events. In pushing for societal change and policy reforms, many citizen movements lack the broader and more defined policy reforms that political parties develop. In using social media as the convening mechanism to organize and stage their protests, they manage to circumvent political parties and CSOs as the traditional entry points for political participation and representation.

7. This paradox of political parties, i.e., on the one hand, as fundamental institutions of political life, and, on the other hand, declining in terms of support, membership and public trust, is a global trend and concern, especially in the more established democracies in Europe and some parts of Asia. Some even go as far as question whether political parties will be relevant in the future. So far, however, those that present themselves as alternatives struggle to maintain their difference from political parties. This ultimately brings to the fore the question of whether CSOs and citizen movements are likely to replace or adopt core functions of political parties. Countries in Asia and Europe have had extensive experience in establishing and sustaining democratic institutions and political systems. In particular, political parties in the countries of the two regions face this reality and have taken steps to meet the challenges that it presents.

8. Since political parties in the two regions operate in different domestic political contexts, as well as socio-economic conditions, there are varying approaches to this concern and a myriad of experiences, which could vary from country-to-country. This includes the idea that there is no common definition of democracy and no one clear political trajectory towards democracy in the two regions. Notwithstanding these, there are common



issues and lessons that could be shared between the two regions and thereby, serve as examples of good practice.

9. This is poignantly the case when one broadly looks at how political parties today relate to citizens, which is the focus of this joint project. In particular, this pertains to the practices and initiatives of political parties in engaging CSOs and citizen movements.

10. This paper presents the details of this project on “Political Parties and the Citizens” – its objectives, programme and expected outputs, target participants, management and implementation arrangements and indicative work plan.

## II. Objectives

11. This project on “Political Parties and the Citizens” seeks to:

(a) **Facilitate sharing of experiences and lessons learned by political parties in engaging CSOs.**

There is recognition of the various roles that CSOs play in society today. It is in this regard that some political parties engage and cooperate with CSOs in advancing certain causes, political initiatives or reforms. By engaging CSOs, political parties could be better informed of issues and, at the same time, connect with the broader constituency of the CSOs, e.g. women, people with disabilities, farmers, etc. By cooperating with political parties, CSOs could advance their advocacies further and bring them to the public arena.

However, CSOs do not always form the coherent, clearly-defined or even representative groups that parties would like to engage with when reaching out to citizens. In Europe, for instance, traditional citizen representatives such as trade unions and religious based organisations have been in stark decline for years. While in some Asian countries CSOs continue to play a positive role in the representation of citizens, in other countries, the CSOs are weak, polarised, or exclusive. This leaves a vacuum for citizen representation that informal citizen movements are increasingly occupying.

Political parties in these societies thus lose their traditional role as counterparts/interlocutors to CSOs. This trend raises the question of what the future of political party-CSO cooperation will look like and if innovative ways to engage with the citizen through CSOs can be identified. Through the sharing of experiences in this area, lessons-learned and good practices adopted by political parties will be identified.



(b) **Explore the role that citizen movements play in domestic politics and how political parties can engage with them.**

Advances in telecommunications and the social media have facilitated the proliferation of citizen movements, particularly citizen-led democratic movements, which led to political transitions in various parts of the world. The most recent of these is the Arab Spring in North Africa. Considered seemingly transnational in nature, these citizen movements are actually strongly rooted among domestic actors that advance the issue at hand from a domestic perspective in order to obtain political buy-in from the citizens.

While generally effective in realising their aims, these citizen movements have challenged the role that political parties traditionally play as the fundamental democratic institution for political participation and representation. At the same time, the elections that followed brought political parties to power that especially young people feel are insufficiently able to address the sentiments of the citizen led forces that had brought about the political changes. This shows how in spite of the increasing relevance in today's world of citizen movements, citizens and political parties continue to struggle finding sustainable mechanisms for citizen participation and representation.

Given this dichotomy between the popularity of citizen movements and their effectiveness political parties find themselves debating how to engage these movements through various modalities. By recognizing the role that citizen movements play and how political parties have engaged them, the challenges and innovations will be identified.

(c) **Identify common trends and challenges that political parties in Asia and Europe face and put forward lessons-learned and follow-up activities that could be pursued in addressing them.**

Through the exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences on how political parties engage citizen movements and CSOs, the diverse contexts, capacities and resources will surface. At the same time, common trends and challenges will also be identified. These facilitate the development of appropriate follow-up activities that could be undertaken by:

- political parties themselves, individually and jointly; and
- CSOs, citizen movements and similar entities.

These could be the contribution of the project to the on-going discourse on the paradox of political parties today.