

Speech Opening office *Ágora Democrática*, 27 March 2008

By Agnes van Ardenne

Excellencies, distinguished representatives of the Ecuadorean political parties and society, representatives of *Ágora Democrática* and International IDEA, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor for me to share with you a few words on behalf of the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) on this special day for *Ágora Democrática*.

I would like to thank you most sincerely for inviting me to the official opening of these new premises. First of all, I would like to congratulate Antonio Aranibar, the coordinator of *Ágora Democrática*, with its new office. This move makes the World Trade Center not only the beating heart of trade but also the centre for democracy support in Quito. In my opinion, both are essential elements in the development of a country.

During my period as a minister for Development Cooperation in the Netherlands until 2007, I frequently argued that democracy is an essential condition for development. Several researches have demonstrated that democracies outperform authoritarian countries on every indicator of development; democracies are more resistant to external shocks than autocracies, their citizens live a decade longer, fifty percent less children die before their fifth birthday, twice as many children attend secondary school, agricultural productivity is a third higher in young democracies and finally, democracies appear to be better able at managing ethnic diversity than dictatorships.

Consequently, the strengthening of democracies in developing countries was one of the important areas in my policy for development cooperation. My successor, minister Koenders, is from a different political party but has the same idea and policy. Effective parliaments and political parties play an indispensable role in making electoral democracies truly democratic and policies effective in their implementation. A democratic and policy oriented political society makes democracy deliver. Public dialogue on social issues and broad support are of course needed for a democratic political order. Political parties are more than only the individual charisma or the leader's personal authority. The organization on behalf of which I am speaking today has arrived at these conclusions over the past years.

But how to ‘support’ democracy? After all, it is an emotionally charged word, especially after it was used to justify the incursion in Iraq. The answer was given 60 years ago by Gandhi. He correctly stated that *“the spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It must come from within.”* Therefore, democracy cannot be exported and imported, but it can be supported.

The programme *Ágora Democrática* is a joint venture between International IDEA and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy. The NIMD has stem from the cooperation between South African and Dutch political parties in the nineties, after the abolishment of apartheid and the introduction of the multiparty democracy in South Africa. In the evaluation of this cooperation Nelson Mandela suggested that this kind of support for strengthening democracy should not be limited to only South Africa, but should also be expanded to other young democracies in the world. And if Mandela makes such a suggestion, it is hard to say no.

In order to fulfill the promise, a professional office had to be set up by the Dutch political parties. This was - and still is - a unique initiative because political parties, of ruling and opposition, big and small, all are cooperating in order to support multiparty democracies and the institutional development of political parties in young democracies. The fact that Dutch parties work together has proven to be an inspiration for political parties entrenched in conflicts and confrontation in the young democracies with whom NIMD has established partnership relations. For many countries, the fact that political parties can work together to advance their democracies is a new concept and has resulted in the emergence of institutionalized forms of dialogue within Centers for Multiparty Democracy.

Nowadays, the NIMD works in 17 different countries, from Indonesia, to Georgia, Kenia, Guatemala, Bolivia and Ecuador. For example, several years ago, the political parties in Bolivia, including the MAS, have established their own institute, La Fundación Boliviana para la Democracia Multipartidaria (FUBODEM). In the lasts months this institute has opened its office to meetings between government and opposition. The differences of opinion and the tensions are not yet resolved but the office continues open for dialogue and negotiations. In Guatemala, in cooperation with the UNDP, the political parties have

developed a national reform agenda several years ago, which now forms the basis for the current policy of the newly elected government of Alvaro Colom.

Facilitating local ownership and development of political reform agendas that aim at improving the performance of democracy through inclusive dialogue processes by stakeholders representing the full political spectrum, is the main methodology of the NIMD approach. Rather than fragmenting support to parties along political ideological lines in often very charged political environments, NIMD aims to contribute to the improvement of the political party system as a whole. Key words are local ownership, dialogue, facilitating national analysis and development of national political reform agendas, inclusivity, peer reviews, sustained cooperation through long-term partnerships with all stakeholders in the political process.

This kind of support can of course only be given if political parties in the partner countries are interested and are prepared to cooperate with each other in strengthening their democratic principles and institutions. After all, the agenda for cooperation can only be developed locally, in referring to the golden rule of Gandhi.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The partnership between NIMD, IDEA and Ágora Democrática is based on the shared philosophy that democracy needs continuous attention. Democracy is not a political system that can be implemented according to a blue print; it needs continuous adjustment and deepening. I hope that the new office, which we are opening today, will make an important contribution to the strengthening of democracy in Ecuador.

Ágora Democrática has developed itself as an institute that is now part of this international network of knowledge exchanges. Since 2006, the Ágora Democrática programme has not only focused on facilitating dialogue between the ruling and opposition parties, but also on improving the capacity for policy development of political parties by organizing activities around the main policy areas of the constituent assembly; like political reforms, decentralization and autonomous regions, energy policies and natural resources, economic

development and social dialogue. Special attention was given to informing the society at large on the Constituent Assembly and improving the relationship between government and the media. For example, in November last year, a weekly radio broadcast started through the network CORAPE in order to socialize the debate on the Constituent Assembly with the participation of several political actors.

I would like to conclude with speaking out the wish that we - as partners in democracy - will strengthen our cooperation in the coming years.

As an American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr once aptly summarized: *Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.*

Thank you for your attention.