

GLOBAL CHALLENGES, LOCAL RESPONSES

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- *While recognising the interconnected nature of attacks on civic space, it remains critical to amplify local civil society voices and support local responses*

ABSTRACT

We are facing a global emergency of civic space. This is now a universal phenomenon, no longer restricted to autocracies and fragile democracies. While there is growing interest in the nature and impact of these restrictions, there is limited analysis of the deeper drivers of the phenomenon, and even less about how to support local responses. We argue that it is critical to recognise the global and interconnected nature of what is driving attacks on civic space, but that it is even more important to find ways of supporting local responses including through an examination of civil society practices. Moreover, civic space cannot be “saved” from outside; we need to build a resilient and independent civil society, that is ready and willing to respond – together, where possible – to the challenges it faces. The over-arching challenge is not a technical, short-term one of pushing back on attacks on civic space, but a longer-term political one of re-imagining a more participatory landscape where the contributions of civil society are celebrated and substantive democracy thrives.

KEYWORDS

Civil Society | Populism | Democracy | Civic Space

Introduction: a multitude of contributing factors

While the early 2010s were characterised by large scale people's uprisings – whether against dictators or against neo-liberal economic policies – it seems that the second half of the decade will be defined by the rise of the strong man and a general degradation of constitutional democracy.¹ This shift represents a major blow for human rights activists and civil society organisations pursuing social justice, already challenged by routine manipulation of the global security discourse to crush dissent at the national level. Yet, if we situate this shift within a context of cause and effect, where uprisings lead to crackdowns, and crackdowns lead to uprisings, then we in civil society have reasons for hope. The narrowing of civic space and democratic principles – even in places we once believed were established democracies – is a matter of enduring concern as attested by the CIVICUS Monitor which uses a participatory methodology to evaluate the state of civic freedoms around the world.² But these trends are also mobilising civil society globally. The shift towards authoritarianism is already leading to strong counter-reactions. The women's march on Washington and associated sister marches around the world following United States (US) President Donald Trump's inauguration in November 2016 perhaps attracted the greatest attention in the media, yet several new and large movements of resistance are emerging in response to neo-fascist, xenophobic and sexist political discourses.³

Many of the contemporary restrictions on civil society are knee-jerk responses, sometimes pre-emptive, to successful popular mobilisations, a sad and unexpected result of the initial hope of the so-called Arab Spring. Of course, this cause and effect pattern is not the only root cause of the growing constraints on civic freedoms. A combination of divisive political leaders and the continued occurrence of terrorist attacks have emboldened religious and ideological extremists of all types to undermine civil society's ability to advance the rights of LGBTI communities, ethnic and religious minorities and refugee populations. Entrenchment of market fundamentalism has also contributed to an environment of increasing intolerance among political and economic elites towards civil society engaged in exposing high level corruption and environmental destruction.

Moreover, those who seek to restrict civil society are increasingly coordinating their efforts across borders to undermine the international human rights framework. Restrictions on international funding for civil society, undermining of multilateral institutions, and retreat from international agreements using flimsy arguments of state sovereignty or the alleged threat of terrorism are all ways that powerful vested interests are seeking to undo cooperation and progress achieved in advancing the human rights discourse. These factors have led to several, often globally observable, drivers of restrictions on civic freedoms. We think three are worth paying attention to.

1 - The business of civil society repression

Although there is rising interest among development bodies and large international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to involve business in solving the world's problems,

including in implementing Agenda 2030, there is lesser appreciation of the impact of mega-corporations and market fundamentalism in undermining civic freedoms.⁴ In fact there is an inherent tension between the headlong embrace of neo-liberal economic policies at the highest levels of national and international decision making and their rejection by ordinary people at the local level often pitting civil society actors working in local communities against powerful politically well-connected businesses.

Private sector influences on civil society borne out of collusion between political and economic elites are particularly clear in the area of natural resource exploitation by extractive industries and mega agri-businesses. Local, often indigenous, environmental defenders face retaliation for protecting natural resources from outside exploitation. For example, in Argentina, the disappearance of activist Santiago Maldonado has sparked accusations that government security forces are cracking down on citizens in order to protect corporate interests.⁵ Maldonado was found dead in October 2017 following a clash between government security forces and indigenous people's rights activists protesting fashion company Benetton's exploitation of ancestral lands of the Mapuche community. The assassination of award winning Honduran activist Berta Caceres who opposed a mega hydro-project is emblematic of the challenges which transcend global North-South boundaries.⁶ In the US, indigenous protestors opposing the controversial Dakota Access Pipeline believing it would destroy ancestral burial grounds and poison their water supply have faced a slew of restrictions prompting the American Civil Liberties Union to come out in their support.⁷

2 - A toxic mix of extremist ideologies

As evident above, states are not the only constrictors of civic space. In conflict prone as well as other environments, proponents of extremist ideologies see civil society with its emphasis on diversity and social cohesion as a key stumbling block in achieving their aims. Terrorists and extremist political forces share a common aim to divide societies around narrow interpretations of ethnicity or religion. They blame contemporary problems on excluded groups. Civil society that pushes back against their divisiveness is variously branded as antithetical to allegedly shared religious, national or cultural values. In Europe, civil society groups working on the rights of refugee and migrant populations are facing a backlash.⁸ In many parts of West Asia, women's rights defenders have been attacked by armed groups seeking to impose puritanical religious doctrines on populations by force dubbing the quest for gender equality to be a Western construct. For example, in Afghanistan, the Taliban has murdered several women's rights activists and forced others to flee their homes for safety.⁹

In South Asia, the assassination of Indian journalist, Gauri Lankesh, a prominent critic of Hindu right wing extremists' actions, is evocative of the challenges faced in the region by bloggers and journalists for standing up against the imposition of narrow minded religious and cultural mores.¹⁰ In Africa, religious evangelists with cross-continental links have spurred homophobia and attacks on organisations and activists promoting the rights of LGBTI people.¹¹

3 - Retreat from democracy and multilateralism

While global media and civil society attention has been focused on the degradation of civic freedoms through the emergence of “neo-fascist” politics in democracies (eg. Brazil, Hungary, India, Philippines, Poland, US etc.) “strong men” and despotic regimes in several countries have been emboldened in the current climate of retreat from internationalism to consolidate their power by manipulating electoral processes and constitutional term limits (eg. Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Turkey, Uganda, Zimbabwe etc). From Russia to Turkey to Venezuela, a battle is underway to silence those who speak “truth to power” wherein repression against those who speak the language of human rights is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Notably, soon after US President Donald Trump, a visceral opponent of the independent media, visited Saudi Arabia the aligned quartet of Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates blockaded Qatar to silence the Al Jazeera news network among other things.¹² The Qatari-supported English segment of Al Jazeera often provides a platform for civil society to highlight human rights abuses and promote alternative discourses.

The above developments, coinciding with the rise and rise of global superpower China, are contributing to a spectacular retreat from the international human rights framework. China’s development model with its emphasis on economic growth and suppression of civil and political freedoms has provided both a blue print and an aid cum trade lifeline to many an authoritarian regime that would not otherwise have been tolerated by the international community. While the lack of transparency surrounding China’s foreign policy makes it difficult to pin point its impact, official Chinese government documents have indicated a lack of commitment to democratic values and human rights, which outside observers have noted as being characteristic of China’s development forays thus far. For example, a 2016 Chinese government foreign policy “white paper” mentioned development but made no mention of “democracy, personal freedom and human rights.”¹³ Arguably, China’s economic dominance is a compounding factor in reducing democratic governments’ and West’s impact in general on advancing civil society rights and participation in the Global South. However, it should also be noted that while Western donors are outwardly much more supportive of human rights and democratic freedoms, blind spots based on their strategic geo-political priorities remain. For example, Human Rights Watch has reported that the European Union has failed to monitor Ethiopia’s misuse of European Union development assistance which it says has increased the “government’s repressive capacity.”¹⁴

All this risks undermining several key victories achieved by civil society at the international level, including United Nations (UN) resolutions on the protection of human rights defenders and the establishment of a UN special representative to report on reprisals against civil society members who engage with multilateral forums. Many in civil society are questioning the value of engagement with international mechanisms when so little is being positively impacted on the ground. Nevertheless, a withdrawal from the international arena would be tantamount to abandoning the gains – even if imperfect – on civic freedoms

and civil society participation. Despite their challenges, processes like the UN's universal periodic review or procedures to register complaints with the UN's special experts offer important pathways to realising rights and highlighting abuses.

Putting Local Responses at the Heart of the Fight Back

As we wrote in *Sur Journal's* 20th anniversary edition in 2014,¹⁵ there was (and remains) a need for civil society voices from the Global South to be amplified and listened to in global discourses on human rights. Discussions of civic space are no different and, indeed, it is even more important to come up with ways to strengthen local actors. Here too, we see three issues worth paying attention to.

1 - Resourcing resilience, close to the ground

In an era of growing linkages between rights oriented civil society organisations (CSOs) and the donor/philanthropic community, finances have become a key area of contestation. CIVICUS' 2015 State of Civil Society Report¹⁶ highlighted that only a tiny proportion of development aid actually goes directly to civil society in the Global South. Meanwhile, countless governments have sought to limit or interfere with international funding of civil society through a raft of well-documented restrictive laws and practices. Yet even when these factors are not fully in play, fickle donor priorities and excessive deference to governmental whims has created a situation whereby several smaller organisations are folding up while bigger ones, more adept at marketing and meeting sophisticated accounting and financial requirements of donors, are expanding. For example, an organisation run by Syrian refugees in Turkey says they have experienced difficulties accessing international funding despite having much more relevant local knowledge than the international organisations that attract global donors.¹⁷ The 2016 High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing Report to the UN Secretary-General¹⁸ reported in 2016 that just 0.2 per cent of humanitarian financing went to local organisations.

International CSOs often Hoover up resources that could have been routed to smaller but equally-effective organisations. Sadly, if this trend continues the organised civil society firmament will start resembling the market with big franchises edging out locally owned and rooted businesses. International donors need to be mindful of how their red tape can exclude organisations that are grounded in communities, possess local expertise and have significantly lower overheads than bigger organisations with sophisticated supply chains.

2 - Beyond accounts-ability

Across the world, the legitimacy of many organised civil society formations is being challenged on several fronts, from politicians demonising them as disconnected special interest groups to social movements that see traditional CSOs as arcane at best and co-opted at worst.

Meanwhile, the usual ways in which CSOs demonstrate their accountability – through compliance with regulatory requirements and donor reporting – are unlikely to be sufficient to convince skeptical politicians or publics. “Accounts-ability should not be confused with accountability” as one Indian activist puts it. “Accounts-ability” refers to accountability for the sake of checking a box. It can also be understood as externally enforced accountability. While this has its place especially in relation to issues of compliance, it will only be by building better, more responsive connections with the communities they claim to serve that CSOs will be able to establish a robust defence against political attacks on them.

Moving “beyond accounts-ability” is about reaching a deeper understanding of the rationale behind what we do as civil society. It involves openness and transparency not for the sake of checking a box but because they are key to making meaningful change. This could include things like people-centred decision-making, real-time adaptation to stakeholder needs, and nurturing the next generation of social change-makers. This form of accountability is not only about financial reporting and transparency to donors but about meaningful dialogue with affected communities and stakeholders, and keeping an eye on big picture outcomes to drive organisational decision-making process.

3 - Standing together

An energetic, civil society-led, global response is needed to counter attacks on civic freedoms. Many of us have done a good job of ensuring that the reality of closing civic space is on the international community’s radar but efforts to push back against restrictions are often duplicative and uncoordinated, and very rarely do they seem to be making a positive impact in national-level political debates about the role of civil society. In too many countries, those who oppose civil society are able to get away by mischievously dismissing those who challenge their power as traitors, disconnected, corrupt and in the pocket of foreign funders. Moreover, civil society must explore new ways of speaking about its own value and make the case for protection of civic freedoms to global publics. We must make clear that the enabling of civil society rights is an essential part of the defence of democracy. To do this, we need to form and work in progressive alliances, bringing together substantial masses of citizens and connecting classic CSOs, protest movements, journalists, trade unions, youth groups, social enterprises, artistic platforms and many other parts of the civil society universe. We need to provide the platforms and leadership necessary to bring together such a diverse range of civil society stakeholders at the regional level and from across the globe to secure crucial short and long-term victories to regain civic space at the national level and incubate new forms of resistance and organising.

Conclusion:

“saving” civic space versus reimagining democracy

A robust civic space can only exist within a functioning democracy, and thus safeguarding civil society also involves re-imagining more participatory models of democracy, with people

at their heart. Seen in this way, the over-arching challenge is not a technical, short-term one of pushing back on attacks on civic space, but a longer-term political one of re-imagining a more participatory landscape where substantive democracy thrives.

In doing so, we in civil society need to challenge the “winner takes all” divisive impulse of electoral democracy and reinforce it with the inclusive anchor of constitutional democracy. Electoral democracy essentially splits people along party lines on the basis of ideology and demands. Populists around the world interpret their electoral mandates as signals to override the opinions of those who didn’t vote for them or don’t agree with them. Constitutionalism on the other hand imposes responsibilities on elected leaders to respect minority opinions and pursue inclusive policies of the kind civil society supports. Much needs to be done to shore up democratic institutions with their inherent checks and balances to protect subaltern groups from the “tyranny” of right wing populism.

As we speak, multiple struggles are being waged through public mobilisations in many parts of the world to create better societies. In Romania, hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets in early 2017 to protest government corruption forced the Prime Minister to rescind emergency orders that would have reduced the punishments for politicians convicted of corruption.¹⁹ In Poland, women’s rights advocates were able to stop a regressive anti-abortion bill that would have prevented women from having any agency over their sexual and reproductive rights.²⁰ In South Korea, mass protests contributed to the impeachment of the conservative President Park Geun-hye who had been a firm proponent of weakening labour rights.²¹ In The Gambia, civil society successfully mobilised the regional and international community to pressure dictatorial leader Yahyeh Jammeh – who had once promised to hang human rights defenders – to respect the popular verdict and demit office.²²

Moreover, gains made at the international level through the adoption of Agenda 2030 commitments on protecting fundamental freedoms and promoting civil society partnerships are opportunities for organised civil society to report on states’ performance on civic space at the international level and to engage in dialogue on civil society participation in decision making at the national level.

Thus, not all of the root causes of the current global democratic crisis point to signs that civil society is in decline or accepts a narrative of disempowerment. There’s plenty of us struggling for a just, inclusive and sustainable world, taking the fight to the streets, newsrooms and the courts.

NOTES

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