CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Civil Society Flashpoint

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OP-ED
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SUMMARY A growing number of governments now treat the concept of civil society as a code word for powerful political subversives, usually assumed to be doing the bidding of the West.

When the concept of civil society took the international aid community by storm in the 1990s, many aid providers reveled in the alluring idea of civil society as a post-ideological, even post-political arena, a virtuous domain of nonpartisan organizations advancing a loosely defined notion of the public good. Funding civil society appealed as a way for aid providers to help shape the sociopolitical life of other countries without directly involving themselves in politics with a capital "P." Power holders in aid-receiving countries, uncertain what to make of this fuss over civil society, were initially inclined to see it as a marginal enterprise populated by small, basically feckless groups of idealistic do-gooders.

Those days are long gone. Whether in Egypt, Turkey, Venezuela, or quite vividly in Ukraine during the final months of Yanukovych's rule, a growing number of governments now treat the concept of civil society as a code word for powerful political subversives, usually assumed to be doing the bidding of the West. Power holders often fear NGOs more than they do opposition parties, seeing the former as nimble, technologically-savvy actors capable of activating sudden outbursts of mass protest.

Manifesting this changed perspective, more than 50 countries in recent years have enacted or seriously considered legislative or other restrictions on the ability of NGOs to organize and operate. At the core of many of these efforts are measures to impede or block foreign funding for civil society groups—including administrative and legal obstacles, propaganda campaigns against NGOs that accept foreign funding, and harassment or expulsion of external aid groups offering civil society support.

Why is this happening? In short, because civil society has been making itself felt. The lion's share of the most significant political upheavals of the past 15 years have come about as the result of assertive citizen activism, starting in Slovakia and Serbia in the late 1990s, continuing through Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Lebanon in the early 2000s, and most recently in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere in the Arab world. The nightmare scenario for power holders in many countries has become waking up one morning and learning that thousands of ordinary citizens have gathered in the main square of the capital demanding justice, vowing not to go home until they get it.

In fact, the protest movements that have driven political change in these countries are not necessarily what the Western aid community refers to (and what it funds) when it talks about civil society. In some of these cases, such as in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, Western-funded NGOs played only a very secondary role, at most. The protests were driven instead by much more diffuse and organic forms of citizen activism that largely bypassed the donor model of formalized, technocratic advocacy groups. Yet such complexities get swept aside by power holders nervous about simmering public discontent and inclined to blame the West for any serious protests they face.

After several years spent improvising responses to the growing pushback against civil society, public and private funders are starting to respond in more concerted ways. They are mounting tactically sophisticated

pressure campaigns to try to head off repressive NGO laws in aid receiving countries. They are effectively supporting efforts on the multilateral level to reinforce the normative framework for civil society space, for example through the United Nations special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. They are exploring how to employ new technological tools to physically distance international aid from the most challenging trouble spots without giving up on directly reaching civil society activists. And they are opening up important new debates about how alternative sources of civil society funding could break the habit of dependence on external support.

But many dilemmas and hard questions still lie ahead. These include:

1) *How to most effectively assert the Western interest in protecting civil society space*. Raising civil society concerns at the highest

diplomatic levels helps give clout to Western objections to bad NGO draft laws and other restrictive measures. Yet high-level diplomatic engagement can also have counterproductive effects. As one Egyptian analyst explained to us regarding the serious tensions in Egypt over Western civil society support, the more that senior Western officials directly pressure Egyptian officials about the need to allow Western funding to Egyptian NGOs, the more those officials are convinced that such funding must be about getting Egyptian NGOs to serve Western agendas.

2) *Whether greater aid transparency is part of the answer*. In response to the heightened, often almost absurdly conspiratorial suspicions in many quarters about Western civil society aid, some aid practitioners contend that increasing the transparency of aid flows will help defuse the accusations and tensions surrounding such work. Yet other practitioners seriously object to this view, fearing that too much transparency will put aid recipients in greater jeopardy and reduce external funders' ability to carry out politically agile assistance in sensitive contexts.

3) *Whether reducing aid dependency will mean aid retreat*. The idea of shifting the civil society assistance paradigm away from dependence on Western financing toward technologically innovative methods of local funding like crowdsourcing is of course appealing. But some civil society activists fear that under the umbrella of changing the paradigm to protect civil society organizations under siege, aid providers will walk away from their commitment to local activists as well as civil society development more broadly.

4) *Divisions among aid providers*. Different aid providers fund civil society in developing countries for different purposes. A number of developmentally oriented aid organizations believe that those working on more politically assertive democracy and human rights assistance are responsible for triggering governmental pushback that ends up affecting the credibility and access of all external funders. As a result, they are disinclined to cooperate in forging common responses to pushback. In other words, the complex ongoing debate within the development aid community over how political aid should be and what working politically really means becomes even more fraught as pushback intensifies.

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