

CIVIL SOCIETY IN WEST ASIA

NEWSLETTER

This is the quarterly newsletter of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on the roles of and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. The programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Iran and Syria can contribute to various processes of democratization and, in turn, how international actors can support this.

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Introduction

Crisis is a much-overworked word in social sciences generally and in politics in particular. Phrases such as 'democracy promotion is in crisis' or 'civil society can never be a force for democratization' are simplistic overstatements. However, one cannot deny that there are serious challenges on the road to democratization, both of a conceptual and of a practical nature. Although the *idea* of democracy, as a general formula for governance, has undeniably broad appeal, there are reasons to be cautious about democracy promotion; something a spate of recent books attest to.¹

This issue's focus is on the challenges that the concept of 'civil society' is facing. Among the much-debated concepts in the 'democratization industry', this one is probably the most contested and several contributions to this Newsletter deal with this. Some articles illustrate the limits and pitfalls of conventional academic analysis, often grounded in the Tocquevillian 'social capital' framework. Although there is a high level of civil society activism in the Arab world, this seems not to be correlated to prospects and demands for democratization. After having studied civil society in authoritarian contexts, one prominent author in the field (Francesco Cavatorta) deduces that it is not only necessary to use a neutral, non-normative definition of the concept, but also to start realizing that rather than weakening the authoritarian system, civil society activism often strengthens authoritarian patterns of rule. Following this lead, he reaches the rather iconoclastic conclusion that Western NGOs should tone down the rhetoric of democratization and work much less, if at all, on democratization in the Middle Eastern region. While his recommendations may be controversial, some might say negative, they are well-worth paying attention to.

Cavatorta's sobering notions find corroboration in Marlies Glasius' research findings on earlier dissident writings in Eastern Europe and South America. She too comes to the tentative conclusion that international actors, including civil society assistance programmes, should adopt a more passive role in 'democracy promotion'. Civil society building should not be approached from an instrumentalist perspective, but 'civil society has value for its own sake, whatever and wherever it may lead to'.

As will become clear from reading this issue, there is still much debate on the relationship between civil society and political society, both in conceptual and practical terms. What seems most noteworthy, however, is the chasm between academic research findings and the 'reality' of the practitioners. It remains one of the Knowledge Programme's tall orders to bridge this gap.

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¹ Peter Burnell and Richard Youngs (eds.), *New Challenges to Democratization*, Routledge 2010; Zoltan Barany and Robert G. Moser (eds.), *Is Democracy Exportable?*, Cambridge University Press 2009.

DECOUPLING CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIZATION

Are we witnessing the end of the undisputed 'social capital paradigm', that civil society is viewed as being, per definition, positive and conducive to democracy? One of a number of scholars increasingly raising concerns about the causal link between a growth in civil society and democratization processes is Dr. Francesco Cavatorta. In a seminar entitled 'Civil society under authoritarian rule', he elaborated on his research into civil society dynamics in the Arab world. As a starting point, Cavatorta questioned the assumed positive role civil society plays in democratization processes in the MENA region. He suggested that, while there is little doubt that associational life is very important in Arab policies, it does not naturally translate into democratization.

According to Cavatorta, civil society in the Arab world is as much a product of bottom-up activism as it is a top-down strategy of regime survival. He believes that, in order for organizations to survive, they must rely on the benefits accumulated via the personal contacts and patronage of their personnel. Civil society actors often use non-democratic means in doing this, resulting in a strengthening of authoritarian rule. In this regard, context shapes, to a large extent, the behaviour of civil society organizations (CSOs): apart from looking at the particular issue(s) an organization is striving for, it is even more important to look at the legal and political context in which the organization operates. Moreover, when studying civil society in an authoritarian context, it is important to use a neutral, non-normative definition of civil society.

Cavatorta disputes, to a degree, the normative division between Islamists and secularists. While he agrees that ideological divisions definitely matter in the Arab world, he suggests that to see them purely as a question of 'Islamists versus secularists' is limiting. Furthermore, significant divisions exist within both camps and on certain issues we even see strong cooperation between Islamist and secular civil society. Therefore, with respect to policy recommendations, external funding should primarily be spent on activities that include 'bridge-building' aspects. Programs can be designed that involve both 'groups', because topics like human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of association concern all groups operating independently from the state.

To date, however, it is hard to find examples of projects supporting Islamist groups. The EU, for example, has never funded an Islamist organization. Nonetheless, Cavatorta thinks it is naïve to view Islamists simply as undemocratic and illiberal and that it's essential to engage with them rather than marginalize them.

According to Cavatorta, a 'better' or 'stronger' civil society does not necessarily result in democratization. In fact, he actually posits that western NGOs should not work on democratization in the region, and strongly recommends that the rhetoric of democratization be toned down.

This is where 'political society' comes into play: Political parties are the *key* to democratization. Simply put, for democratization to work, it's necessary to have the opposition of strong political parties. Therefore, if we want democratization to occur in the MENA region, efforts need to be made to strengthen parties. Political society can ask for democratization, civil society - in most cases - does *not* ask for it, since it is often co-opted by the regimes. The added value of civil society, then, lies not so much in its direct ability to 'establish democracy', but more in its ability to prepare people for the next 'stage', in which society is more open.

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This article is based on the seminar 'Civil society under authoritarian rule' held on the 13th of November, 2009 in Amsterdam.

The full report of the seminar is available on the website of Hivos: www.hivos.nl

SYRIA

Political society and civil society in Syria: the politics of a-politicization

Wael Sawah, a former leftist who spent ten years in a variety of Syrian detention centers and now a committed blogger on Syrian affairs, wrote that:

‘political activities have their domain: the government, the parliament, political parties, and the street. The domain of civil society is cultural, social, developmental, and ethical affairs. Civil society’s mission is to defend values that are political in their core, such as democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights, but with non-political tools and methods.’ (Sawah 2009)

He continues, that the ‘civil society activists focus on social, development, and advocacy issues [...] using new tools such as the new media, blogs, the Facebook and others.’

Sawah's strict division of labor between political and the civil activities must be contextualized in a period which many dissidents refer to as ‘the Damascus Fall’ - the failure of the Damascus Spring when political activists, writers, artists, businessmen, lawyers and others cooperated and called for extensive political reforms. They realized quickly, however, that the new regime could not be pressured into change. Party politics had proven to be the least effective method of countering the state. In fact, their activism has led to a worsening of the authoritarian nature of the al-Asad regime. To the authorities, civil society was nothing more than a disguise for dissidence and it didn't take long before the regime began to monitor closely and intimidate such activists. Amid this culture of fear and accusation, the only chance for these so-called civil society activists to continue their work has been to insist on their apolitical identity. They have done this by appropriating the regime's official discourse on what politics means and which domains it involves, and on what culture, society, development and ethical affairs mean and which activities deserve such safe labels. The belief is that the only realistic chance to reform the regime is to work with the regime, and the only way to create ties to the regime is to speak the language of the regime.

Despite fears among some dissidents that Syrian civil society is becoming increasingly apolitical and, as a result, no longer able to present a counterweight to the state, the distinction secular activists make between Syrian civil and political society in the post-Damascus Spring era might just prove to be one of the most successful political opposition strategies to al-Asad's authoritarian regime.

Chantal Mouffe explains how politics in liberal democracies is becoming more and more consensual as the distinction between left and right is increasingly blurred (Mouffe 2005). She suggests that politics is being played out in a moral register where liberal democracies speak a rhetoric of right and wrong. This, in her view, leads to the creation of the kind of antagonistic politics that we have experienced since the end of the Cold War. Mouffe argues that a vibrant democracy requires agonistic politics where differences are acknowledged without demonizing opponents and justifying their eradication. In fact, for agonistic politics, the distinction between left and right is vital. I would like to take the distinction she makes between agonistic and antagonistic politics in liberal democracies, and the consequences of each type of politics, as a starting point for thinking about distinguishing between the civil and political society in the authoritarian context of Syria.

The al-Asad regime has always argued about politics in a moral register and viewed any political activism as antagonistic and a threat to its existence. In order to promote an alternative state-society relation to the organic and familial one which the al-Asad's enforce, and to move the regime to argue about politics in the political register, dissidents need to create spaces in which consensus can be practiced. These spaces are those which the regime labels as apolitical: children's issues, women rights, etc.

Obviously these spaces are political and both the regime and the dissidents know this. But these arenas allow both sides to enter into a dialogue and negotiations, however unequal the power relations. While Mouffe argues that consensus politics leads to the end of real democracies and creates antagonistic rather than agonistic politics, in authoritarian settings consensus politics can break antagonistic politics and drag politics back into the realm of the political. This can only occur outside of the domains the regime defines as political. Consensus on seemingly apolitical issues has at least two advantages for these activists: First, their existence is acknowledged, and provides legitimacy as an alternative voice to that of the regime (not as dissidents and an opposition force of course) for the duration of the negotiations and both sides exercise agonistic politics. The activists manage to engage the regime in the politics of 'as if' for this period, and both sides pretend that their negotiations are outside their hegemonic struggles and only concern the specific topic being discussed. This subversion of the politics of 'as if' empowers the dissidents.

Second, the dissidents gain experience of the political elite, their rivalries and cooperation. I have often heard Syrian activists mention how one of their first priorities was to learn who they are dealing with and what this regime is composed of.

Finally, Mouffe suggests that:

'what is at stake in agonistic struggle,[...], is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured: it is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally. The antagonistic dimension is always present, it is a real confrontation but one which is played out under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the adversaries.' (Mouffe 2005: 12)

Obviously neither the agonistic struggles nor its antagonistic dimension in Syria are regulated by a set of democratic procedures. But what both adversaries – in the context of unequal power relations - have accepted in Syria is that politics will have to be played out in the 'non-political' domains. If the secular activists are to have any chance of a continued presence, it is by obeying this rule. There is a fine line between becoming an 'officially appointed' dissident and existing as an authentic voice. Whether commissioned or authentic both groups, however, have to work with the regime. Often, this is more explicit for the authentic groups than for those commissioned by the state. By appropriating the regime's official discourse and by creating ties to the political elite and a variety of political institutions, dissidents can help deepen the cracks, magnify, and push to the surface – to the public - the internal antagonisms.

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IRAN

From Civil Society to Networking Civil Movement: Transmutation of the Iranian Reformism into the Green Movement

The June 2009 presidential election in Iran was about far more than simply electing a president. Overnight it turned into the battleground between two political approaches, which have been competing ever since the establishment of the 'Islamic Republic': republicanism versus religious autocracy. The challenges between the two approaches have framed the political apparatus of Iran and its development.

Republicanism is mainly represented by reformist factions who believe in the irreducibility and irreversibility of the people's will as the main source of legitimacy of the Islamic government. Republicans maintain that, according to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the people's vote - embodied in the elections and the ballot boxes - must be taken into account and the officials (including the Supreme Leader), as representatives of the people, are obliged to follow the people's decision. These reformist factions include the Clergymen Assembly Fighters, The Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization, The Participation Front students' Consolidation of Unity and some prominent Ayatollahs and Mujtaheds including Montazeri (who died in December 2009), and Sanei. On the other side is the conservative camp including the Militant Clergy Community, the Islamic Motalefe Party, Abadgaran Coalition, and finally Ayatollah Khamenei himself. They sustain that the people (or at least the majority of them) are not qualified to elect the country's higher officials or make decisions on social and political affairs. Furthermore, these religious autocrats believe that the Supreme Leader is elected by God, and shall be 'discovered' only by the qualified clerics of the Council of the Experts.

The main message of Khatami's landslide victory in the 1997 presidential elections was the people's desire for a Republic. Aware of this, the reformist government encouraged restoration and empowerment of the civil society organizations as the main platform for the people's democratic participation. Over the course of time, civil society in Iran was conceived through the classical theories of social movements. The reformist republican attitude resulted in the formation of various institutions and organizations including political parties, journals and media, publishing houses, NGOs, associations, local councils, women, students' and teachers' organizations, workers' syndicates, and the like.

The rise of the reform movement inevitably invited counter reactions from the threatened conservative camp. In the aftermath of the 1997 elections it attempted to curtail the reformist civil society activities, resulting in widespread socio-political frustration of reformist policies. This frustration, along with policy mistakes made by the reformists resulted in them losing the 2005 presidential elections, in favour of Ahmadinejad.

Civil Society in the Post-reform Era

Since coming to power, supported by the Supreme Leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has intensified political pressure on civil and political activists, as well as journalists. His major goals have been, on the one hand, shutting down civil society organizations and newspapers, using coercion, intimidation, and imprisonment of civil activists; and, on the other hand, reducing and channelizing people's political participation via the distribution of money among the lower classes and allocation of nationally-owned resources and finances to the Basij militia forces and the Islamic Republic Guardian Corps. His actions have been further facilitated by the unforeseen and unprecedented oil income of the country. This marks one more period in the political history of contemporary Iran during which the rentier despotic regimes have been able to swerve and nullify the pressing demands for democratization.

Ahmadinejad's policies have not only provoked anger among the reformists and civil activists, they have also resulted in rising inflation which, in turn, has led to a deterioration of the economic conditions of the lower classes. In response to the

increasing political pressure and censorship, many civil and political activists, along with other educated Iranians, started building parallel social networks as a substitute to the current civil and political organizations.

The Emergence of the New Social Movement

From this moment, the civil society movement transmuted into a new social phenomenon, which can be best understood under the rubric of 'new social movement'. Notable characteristics of this new mode of Iranian civil society are its horizontal structure of its communications and leadership; its mobilization and growth; the convergence of the borders of the political and the social; and its comprehensiveness in terms of representing the average demands of different social strata, as well as those of the Iranian Diaspora.

On the structural side we have witnessed the emergence of various websites, weblogs and virtual group discussions. These played a significant role in informing the Iranian people about different aspects of conservative politics during the 2009 election campaigns. After the election, this infrastructure was redirected and now functions as the main source of information exchange, mobilization, and so forth. These networks are privileged by not being located at specific physical places and have, so far, avoided being monitored by the secret police.

Women were among the pioneers in establishing social networks in order to fight back against the discriminatory policies of the conservatives. Networks such as Meydaan, Feminist School, and the Association of Iranian Women played key roles and their and others contributions have been termed the 'feminine substance' of the Green Movement – the name given to the mobilization of the people which occurred during the June 2009 elections. It implies that, among many other factors, the family has been and continues to be at the heart of Green Movement as a new social movement. Interestingly, the same model started by the women's groups was subsequently adopted by students and political activists.

These social networks have played a significant role in mobilizing people against the conservative policies of the past four years. At the time of the June presidential elections, these social networks multiplied in quantity and were the main campaigning forces of the challenger candidates. Civil activists, alongside apolitical youth, housewives, workers, teachers, and university lecturers were mobilized as a direct result of these intersecting networks, and redirected and reactivated in the electoral campaign and the presidential election.

The Green Movement has been based on two major factors: on the one hand, the policies of the conservative camp back-firing and causing social and economic turmoil; and on the other, the social networks of the Iranian society which have been emerging in response to the suffocating political situation. The civil society activists who gave life to this new social movement are atypical - the movement has been shaped by previously apolitical men and women who became politicized during the electoral campaigns.

Outcomes

The Green Movement as a revitalization of republicanism was the primary outcome of the factors described above; that is, the social networks established during the past four years and the back-firing of conservative policies in the wake of the rigged elections. Furthermore, many Iranians, both inside and outside of the country, have regularly boycotted elections in Iran since the Islamic Republic came into being in 1979. Recent developments, however, could succeed in inducing many currently indifferent and de-politicized Iranians, at home and abroad, to actively participate in public debates, campaigns, networking, and mass protests in the future.

This is a contribution written by the knowledge programme team.

PUBLICATIONS

DISSIDENT WRITINGS AS POLITICAL THEORY ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY

Civil society has long been thought to contribute to opening-up and democratizing totalitarian and authoritarian states. Experiences in Eastern Europe and South America added to this optimism. Yet recent developments and insights show that these experiences cannot be easily transferred to other contexts.

Instead of re-examining how exactly civil society played a role in democratization processes in Eastern Europe and South America, which has been done by others in much detail, In her paper, Glasius approaches the issue from a different angle. Her research reviews dissident writings to come to an understanding about how dissidents and activists conceptualized civil society. She hypothesizes that, by studying the original documents, new insights might be developed on how civil society functions under authoritarian regimes. The paper goes on to link these insights to the context of today by concluding with some hypotheses that may be useful for contemporary civil society actors operating in authoritarian settings.

Her study led to some interesting findings. Of relevance in the context of West Asia is her discovery that the dissidents' strategy of appealing to the law is productive for civil society actors in authoritarian settings because it is language to which the regime needs to respond. Furthermore, it became apparent that all authoritarian systems, to some extent, aim to atomize their society by suppressing connections between people and instilling them with a constant sense of fear. Dissident strategies function to combat this atomization, via underground communication, truth telling and openly expressing disbelief in the official ideology.

Of relevance to practitioners is Glasius' main hypothesis that civil society building should not be approached from an instrumentalist perspective, but rather that civil society has value for its own sake, whatever and wherever it may lead to. On the whole, the dissidents and activists she encountered rejected explicit political considerations in favor of broader social transformations. The key may lie in entrenching democratic practices in society before formal, top level democratization occurs; something which in turn forms a precondition for the later sustainability of a democratic society. This might explain why, even though they were aware of the world beyond their state, dissidents from Eastern Europe and South America did not request outside help from western governments or publics. A tentative conclusion might be, then, that international actors should adopt a more passive role, as a source of inspiration or moral support. The findings of Glasius' research might have far reaching consequences for those international donors and governments seeking to promote democratization through civil society assistance programs today. Her article offers a more modest view of civil society's role in starting democratic transitions and an even smaller role for international actors in supporting it.

This summary is based on the forthcoming article by Dr. Marlies Glasius, lecturer International Relations at the University of Amsterdam.

PUBLICATIONS

The Downfall of Simplicity and the 'Complex' Notion(s) of Democratization: A Revision of the Relation between Political Society, Civil Society and Democratization

Several theories have been constructed regarding the relationship between the different factors that influence democratization. The pluralist notion focuses on the belief that civil society is the most important stimulus for democratization in a positive causal relation. From this notion flows the idea that civil society is (partially) capable of controlling the state. A more vibrant and autonomous civil society is believed to be better capable of checking and balancing the power of the state, from the bottom-up.

Increasing attention is also being given to the critical notion that political society, the mediating sphere between state and civil society, is considered to be the main driver of democratic reform. Civil society, the argument goes, cannot carry the democratization process on its own and there should be more focus on political society. Some argue that political society does stimulate democratization, though only minimally. Another vision sees civil society as the spoiler of democratic change. It may be more prudent to focus democratic assistance on the establishment of stable and efficient social and political institutions, and on the maintenance of key social infrastructures that have become crucial to the legitimacy of any contemporary system of government.

Both notions, however, have been criticized for their simplicity. Firstly, in the pluralistic notion, the actual relationship between civil society and democratization is hard to measure. Moreover, the pluralist notion of civil society does not differentiate between the forces that occupy either civil society or political society. Civil society is not one united, concordant sphere wherein all actors have the same interest and ideas. The critical notion aims to increase party aid from the international community. Unfortunately, party aid providers until now have not created a secure widely accepted domestic model of success.

The failings of these two approaches has left room for the development of the hybrid notion as an explanation for the interaction between political and civil society. In this notion the state, the civil and the political society are interconnected. Both bottom-up processes from civil society and top-down processes from political society occur at simultaneously.

I suggest there is room for a fourth notion - the 'complex' notion - which gives weight to the more complex relation between explanatory variables. It is necessary to drop notions which concentrate on clear cut causal relations, and that includes the aforementioned hybrid notion, and replace them with more complex ones. The importance of context must be emphasized, for a country or region defines the situation, the possibilities and the concepts which are essential when looking for change. Furthermore, the chance of transition and the success of democratization probably depend on the sacrifices people are willing to make. Finally, these two factors - context and the willingness to sacrifice - also interact with interests and ideas. The result of this interaction, in turn, interacts with those that take place between the state, civil and political society. Both outcomes, separately and together, have a possible (causal) relation with democratization.

I would recommend that rather than focusing on civil or political society in isolation, efforts should be made to build coalitions and to strengthen aid through more serious evaluation and putting pressure on governments.

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This summary is based on a paper written for the knowledge programme. The full working paper is available on the website of Hivos: www.hivos.net

PUBLICATIONS

Civil Society activism in Morocco: 'much ado about nothing'?

In this Newsletter (p.2), Cavatorta puts forward an answer to the question of whether the liberal consensus regarding the emancipatory nature of civil society is justified. After outlining current theoretical debates about civil society and democratization, and examining how such general debates have informed studies of civil society in the Arab world, he provides an in-depth analysis of the case of Morocco. Cavatorta concludes that the evidence from the Moroccan case largely confirms a skeptical view of the effective linkage between civil society activism and democratization.

There are three (mainstream) notions regarding the relation between civil society and democratization. The first notion holds that civil society is, by definition, liberal and democratic, leading to the belief that its expansion coincides with the expansion of liberal and democratic values. Both academics and policy-makers have taken the validity of the causal mechanism between a strong civil society and democracy for granted. However, since the late 1990s, criticism has surfaced regarding the validity of both the theoretical assumptions and the empirical evidence of this notion. Next to desirable results, civil society activity can generate negative outcomes as well. For this reason, some scholars claim that no positive normative traits should be attached to the concept of civil society, as they would inevitably bias it as an explanatory variable.

Regarding the state and importance of civil society in the Arab world there are, broadly speaking, three views: The first view considers civil society in the region to be very weak because it is not heavily informed by liberal values. As a result, it is unable to pressure the regime into making democratic reforms. The second view conceptualizes civil society in neutral terms. The strength of civil society depends on the groups that make it up and the values they subscribe to: civil society can be strong and 'uncivil' at the same time. In the context of the Arab world that view translates into a strong civil society. Nonetheless, this is wholly unsuited to the promotion of democracy and human rights because the main groups and associations within civil society are Islamist. The third view suggests that civil society in the region has indeed been strengthening over the last decade, however, that process has generated an artificial civil society. Many civil society organizations are largely creations of the regime itself, while others are either beholden to the state or fully co-opted.

By analyzing three areas of activism in Morocco, (the reform of the Family Code, human rights activism and the national initiative for Human Development) the dynamics of the relationship between civil society and the country's political institutions become clearer. Cavatorta concludes with a pessimistic view on the ability of the Moroccan civil society to generate democratic transition. Most of the liberalizing initiatives have not come from below, but from the top down. Civil society organizations largely contribute to reinforcing authoritarian practices, because, in order to see their preferences met, they have to play by the rules when competing for attention from the Monarchy. According to Cavatorta, the tried and tested method of 'divide and rule' by the Moroccan monarchy is quite successful. All in all, the idea of civil society as an engine of democratization should be abandoned. Much greater political transformations must occur at the broader institutional level to permit the liberation of civil society activism, which could then become a catalyst for further democratic change.

This summary is based on the article 'Civil society activism in Morocco: much ado about nothing?' by Dr. Francesco Cavatorta, Lecturer School of Law and Government at the Dublin City University

The full working paper is available on the website of Hivos: www.hivos.net

IN FOCUS

IKV Pax Christi

In 2007, two Dutch organizations focused on peacebuilding - Interkerkelijk Vredesberaad (IKV) and Pax Christi - merged. Both are active in the Netherlands and internationally, and have programs in 25 countries around the world. The main goals of these programs are peacebuilding, reconciliation and justice. A key region for the newly formed IKV Pax Christi is the Middle East and one of the strategies the organization adopts to build peace in this area is support for civil society organizations involved in democratization processes. This section of the Newsletter looks more closely at the work of IKV Pax Christi in the Middle East.

Marjolein Wijninckx is the Senior Programme Officer for IKV Pax Christi in the Middle East. She argues that the IKV Pax Christi program in the Middle East focuses on strengthening local capacities for peace as well as on promoting political initiatives to establish peace in the region. IKV Pax Christi works in cooperation with local civil society initiatives in Morocco, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel. Wijninckx says that for IKV Pax Christi, working on peace and working on democracy in the Middle East are inseparable. The reason the organization supports democracy is twofold: on the one hand, the conflict in the region serves as an excuse to defer democratic reforms; on the other hand, lack of democracy is an obstacle to a just and lasting peace. Often, peace agreements that originate from undemocratic processes are not supported by the people. This lack of democracy hinders very necessary internal dialogue processes, for example on minority issues. IKV Pax Christi believes that, in order to be sustainable, peace building and democratization must go hand-in-hand.

IKV Pax Christi brings together local partner organizations so they can learn from each other. In each country, the main goal of the program is slightly different. In Syria, for example, this goal is to give civil society actors more freedom and room to operate. IKV Pax Christi explains on its website that this is especially relevant because these actors have suffered severe repression over the past year.

In conclusion, IKV Pax Christi is an organization that puts local actors at the centre of efforts to establish peace and democracy in the world. The organization's website explains that the purpose of this cooperation is always 'to build bridges, to nurture mutual understandings and to improve disrupted relations between groups'. Helping a country will only be truly helpful if the international and the local work together. This is reflected in the fact that the organization works closely with civil society actors that are, like IKV Pax Christi, independent of the state. Mindful of the fact that democracy will improve if a country has a strong civil society, these actors receive support. Democracy is needed to sustain peace and make countries in conflict areas better places to live.

Visit the IKV Pax Christi website:
www.ikvpaxchristi.nl

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BOOK REVIEW

CIVICUS Global Survey of the State of Civil Society, volume 1 & 2 (2007)

Civil society is playing an increasingly important role in governance and development around the world. Not only is its effective participation in the decision-making process an imperative for progress and development in a society, but it can also contribute to the strengthening of democratic and pluralistic political systems. However, in most countries around the world there is limited knowledge about the state and shape of civil society. Civil society stakeholders have few opportunities to come together and reflect on the current state of civil society and the challenges it is facing.

For this reason the CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) has been developed as an action planning tool for civil society around the world. The aim of the CSI is to create a knowledge base and momentum for civil society strengthening initiatives. The CSI is initiated and implemented by and for civil society organizations at the country level. The survey actively involves and disseminates its findings to a broad range of stakeholders including government, donors, academics and the public at large.

The CIVICUS project contains two volumes in which profiles of the state of civil society in 45 countries are presented, and subsequently issues are discussed from comparative perspectives. Selected themes include the role of civil society in promoting values, norms and rights, the challenge of socio-economic and democratic development, what makes civil society strong and the relationship between civil society and the state.

To assess the state of civil society in each country, a number of dimensions are measured using a diamond-shaped tool. This four-dimensional approach measures the structure, values, impact and environment of the particular civil society. The CSI focuses not only on measurable, short term indicators, but also on long term and more complex processes so often neglected in evaluations of civil society. According to CIVICUS, the research results are 'building blocks to strengthen and safeguard civic space for people to meet and act together for a just society'. This assessment is then used to collectively set goals and create an agenda for strengthening civil society in the future.

Today, all eyes are refocused on the Middle Eastern region in the analysis of the importance of the state of civil society for the functioning of a country. The idea that civil society holds the key to the democratization of authoritarian regimes is still very much alive in circles of practitioners and academics. It is unfortunate, then, that the only Middle Eastern country that is included in the survey is Lebanon. The primary goal of the CSI is to enhance the strength and sustainability of civil society, and, as a result, the contribution it can make to positive social change. For this reason alone the CSI assessment is highly relevant for analyzing civil society in an authoritarian context. The next step for the CIVICUS project therefore should be to assess those countries where civil society is in need of strengthening and for which currently there is little information available; countries such as Syria and Iran. Such an assessment would be highly anticipated by field practitioners and civil society activists both inside as well as outside those particular countries.

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The full titles of the reviewed books are:
CIVICUS Global Survey of the State of Civil Society, volume 1: Country Profiles and volume 2: Comparative Perspectives

Visit the website of CIVICUS:
www.civicus.org

Colophon

Newsletter Civil Society in West
Asia
January 2010, issue 2

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