



CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL TRANSITION IN AFRICA

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Introduction

The renewal of interest in democracy has thrust the concept of civil society into a prominent position in both social science theory and development policy. Pressures for political reform have emanated from two quarters. In the international arena, the superpowers have adjusted to the end of the Cold War by withdrawing or reducing support to client states, thereby undercutting authoritarian regimes. At the same time, demands for political change have emanated from within domestic societies as citizens have mobilized to rid themselves of the military and one-party structures that have buttressed illegitimate power. To the extent that popular forces have captured the political initiative from state elites, analysts now acknowledge the importance of civil society.

Civil society is a truly international idea. Its roots can be found in both the liberal and Marxist traditions of European political thought, for example in de Tocqueville's emphasis on the importance of voluntary associations in promoting democratic citizenship and in Gramsci's emphasis on the role of social institutions in either buttressing or challenging state power. The emergence of a democratic opposition to authoritarian socialist party-states in Central and Eastern Europe provided the impetus to the contemporary revival of civil society (e.g. Havel, 1985; Ashe, 1990; Kennedy, 1991; Rau, 1991). The concept was then picked up by analysts of transitions from authoritarian rule in Southern Europe and Latin America (e.g. O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, 1986; Mainwaring and Viola 1984; Eckstein, 1989; de Janvry et.al., 1993). It has also been adopted by social critics who note the decline of civic values in the advanced capitalist countries and has been most recently applied to social movements and political transitions in Russia, China and countries in Africa (e.g. Gustafson, 1989; Gold, 1990; Fowler et.al., 1992; see also bibliography, sections 2 and 3).

Common elements in the civil society discourse are a critique of state domination of public life, a preference for reform over revolution, and a strategy for political change based upon negotiations and elections. Since this discourse has emerged in African countries, we must now ask: Is there a civil society in Africa? What role, if any, can it play in democratization?

This paper argues that there is prima facie evidence of a nascent civil society in certain African countries. But universal ideas require adaptation to take into account distinctiveness of different world regions, notably in the level of socioeconomic development and in the cultural attributes of different nations and sub-nations. Westerners, projecting aspirations derived from their own histories, are prone to overestimate the prospects for democratic change elsewhere in the world. We should therefore expect civil societies in Africa to possess different contours to civil societies elsewhere in the world and resist the temptation to anoint them as the harbingers or the instruments of a brighter democratic future.

Definitional Issues

The concept of civil society offers an opportunity to understand, and influence, the process of democratization. As the attached bibliography illustrates, the literature on civil society has burgeoned, with more than fifty items appearing over the last five years on Africa alone. The draft USAID Strategy Paper on Building Democracy (1993a, October 5 draft version) mentions civil society three times in an 8-page document. Nevertheless, there is a danger that the rapid acceptance of a concept may simply be a fad. All too often the concept of civil society is used unreflectively. The purpose of this section of the paper is to clarify this complex and abstract concept and to suggest which aspects are most accessible to, and appropriate for, support by a development assistance agency.

Let us begin with some essential definitional points about the nature of civil society and its relationships with the state.

Civil society is defined here as a sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, structures of voluntary association, and networks of public communication.

One must acknowledge that civil society -- like the state and political society -- is a theoretical concept rather than an empirical one. It is a synthetic conceptual construct that is "not necessarily embodied in a single, identifiable structure" (Bayart, 1986, 112). To make it serviceable for purposes of development assistance, we must identify the observable parts of the composite concept. Drawing on the definition presented above, we distinguish the institutions of civil society as:

(1) The norms of civic community. The most important values for the construction of civil society are trust, reciprocity, tolerance, and inclusion. Trust is a prerequisite for individuals to associate voluntarily; reciprocity is a resource for reducing the transaction costs of collective action; political tolerance enables the emergence of diverse and plural forms of association. These values are promoted by citizens who actively seek to participate in public affairs. The presence of civic norms can be measured by sample surveys and public opinion polls and observed in voting, "joining," and varieties of collective behavior. These norms of civic community are taught not only in the family but also by civic organizations such as schools, churches, and community groups.

(2) The structures of associational life. In order for civic life to become institutionalized, it must be expressed in organizational form. The most common organizational structure in civil society is the voluntary association, a grouping of citizens who come together by reason of identity or interest to pursue a common objective. There are various types of voluntary associations ranging from the localized, informal, and apolitical on the one hand to national, legally-registered, policy advocacy organizations on the other. While policy advocacy groups may have the largest and most direct impact on national political life, they do not exhaust the relevant organizations in civil society (Blair, 1993b). Whether or not they are explicitly oriented to civic or political functions, all types of voluntary association help to populate and pluralize civil society.

(3) The networks of public communication. In order to be politically active, citizens require means to communicate with one another and to debate the type of government they desire for themselves. Civic discourse can take place in various fora, the most important of which are the public communications media, both print and electronic. State or private monopolies

of media ownership and public opinion are not conducive to civil society; civil society is always stronger where there is a diversity of media outlets and political views. New technologies of personal communication--including cellular telephones and fax and photocopying machines--can strengthen civil society by empowering citizens to communicate independently of state supervision. A healthy civil society is a multi-stranded web of cross-cutting channels of communication.

Our definition draws upon the best current theoretical work on the subject of civil society. Robert Putnam emphasizes that "civic community" is built upon norms and networks: norms of reciprocity through which social actors learn to trust one another and networks of interpersonal communication and exchange (1993, 172-3). Together, such norms and networks comprise a stock of "social capital" which social actors can draw upon when they undertake collective action (see also Hirschmann, 1984; Coleman, 1988; Ostrom, 1990; Bates, 1992; Uphoff, 1993a). Michael Walzer argues that civil society breeds "communal men and women...the picture here is of people freely associating and communicating...forming and reforming groups of all sorts...for the sake of sociability itself" (1991, 298). In his view "the good life can only be lived in civil society" where citizens are guided by such "norms of civility" as social trust, political tolerance, and community activism (ibid). In a similar vein, Cohen and Arato see ordinary people as the agents of modern civil society, creating it through "forms of self-constitution and self-mobilization" (1992, ix, 17-18). Civil society is, by definition, participatory. It comes into being when people construct "a sphere other than and even opposed to the state...includ(ing), almost always unsystematically, some combination of networks of legal protection, voluntary association, and forms of independent expression" (ibid.).

In order to further differentiate civil society, let us elaborate on what it is not.

First, civil society lies beyond the household. While activity in civil society may be motivated by a quest for private advantage, it is not "private" in the sense of being confined to the domestic arena. Instead, it is decidedly "public" in two senses: it is collective action in which individuals join to pursue shared goals, and it takes place in the institutional "commons" that lie beyond the boundaries of the household. In every polity, people share identities and interests that are inadequately expressed by family or state institutions. Civil society itself is a "public formation" whose purpose is to manage matters of common concern without resort to state intervention (Tandon, 1991, 10; see also Habermas 1989; Chazan 1990). Civil society is the crucible of citizenship in which individuals have the opportunity to wean themselves from dependence on either family or state. As citizens, people define community needs, assert claims of political rights, and accept political obligations. They do so primarily by clustering together in organized groups of like-minded individuals in order to obtain common objectives.

Second, civil society stands apart from the state. We can conceive of the state as the realm of the politics of force by which governing elites exert their domination over society. By contrast, civil society is the realm of consent through which citizens may choose to accept or to reject the use of force by state officials. When citizens consent, they perform a hegemonic role, helping to reproduce the prevailing social order (See Hoare and Smith, 1971; Salamini, 1981). Within the state, political action is motivated by means of command backed, implicitly or explicitly, by the sanction of violence. In contrast, social initiatives are voluntary within civil society, either because actors perceive a material advantage or because they are motivated by commitment to an ethical or political value (Etzioni, 1988; Wolfe, 1989; Brown and Korten, 1989). While the state may possess a legitimate claim to the monopoly of violence, it cannot claim exclusive dominion over economic or ethical life. Yet economic

interest and moral values are key poles around which political activity regularly clusters. These are the province of civil society.

Civil society is distinguishable not only from the family and the state but also from the realm of social action known as "political society". Whereas the civil society contains institutions like neighborhood associations, professional bodies, and organized religions, political society refers to political parties, elections and legislatures (see Stepan, 1988, 3-4; Cohen and Arato, 1992, ix). Specifically, political society refers to the institutions through which social actors seek to win and exercise state power. The institutions of political society--which are located in society and not in the state--specialize in partisan political contestation and in the construction of governing coalitions. While actors in civil society learn the public arts of associating together and expressing collective interests, they almost always seek autonomy from the state. The expression of civic interests does not extend to efforts to gain and exercise control over state power.

Moreover, whereas civil society is an arena for the expression of economic interest, it is not always coterminous with the market economy. The market economy tends to atomize society by treating people as individual consumers rather than as members of solitary groups. The operations of the market also tend to promote inequality between rich and poor and thereby to undermine the horizontal linkages among political equals that are the basis of voluntary association. In its most extreme manifestations, the marketplace may even allow the emergence of economic monopolies that systematically undermine pluralism and competition in society. Thus market economy and civil society are complementary only to the extent that both simultaneously promote inclusionary forms of competition. Under these circumstances, civil society

is the political manifestation of economic interest, for example taking the forms of chambers of commerce and industry or of organized labor unions.

Let us close this section with reference to two practical implications that derive from the development of civil society: the likelihood of intensified political conflict and the essential role of the state.

First, civil societies are heterogenous entities, composed of diverse elements, reflecting the political cleavages and conflicts of the wider societies in which they are located. The incidence of social conflict--in the forms of political opposition and economic competition--can be expected to rise as long-standing political monopolies are dissolved and replaced by a plethora of authentic organizations based in society. In deeply divided societies, the emergence civil society is likely to be accompanied by an intensification of ethnic identity. In patriarchal societies, women who organize on gender lines can expect to encounter an alternating process of progress and backlash. In industrializing societies, the middle classes are likely to be the protagonists of civil society: on one hand they articulate "universal" values and build broad, multiclass political coalitions; on the other hand, the emergence of a bourgeoisie prompts new forms of resistance from working people, women, and the dispossessed. In time, however, by allowing space for particular interests to vent their aspirations, civil society holds out the hope of reducing the stakes of political conflict and eventually "domesticating nationalism" (Walzer, 1991, 300). Eventually, in the best of all possible circumstances, the practice of political toleration can lead to an aggregation of political organizations and an emerging consensus on political values.

Second, the state -- however formative, weak, or retreating -- is not going to wither away. There are many basic developmental functions which must be performed for which the state

is uniquely equipped, not least the guardianship of territorial boundaries and social order. For this reason, a strong civil society is likely to be associated not only with a competitive market economy but also with an effective and capable state. Associational life will be stunted in a context of political violence, in the absence of the rule of law, or where essential services are intermittent. Networks of public communication cannot develop fully unless the state establishes and enforces guarantees of freedom of speech. In short, civil society needs an enabling environment of legal rights and infrastructural supports. It cannot operate where public order or the state is collapsing or operating well below capacity. In sum, there is "no possibility of choosing, like the old anarchists, civil society alone" (Walzer, 1991, 301). Instead, civil society is "institutionalized and generalized through laws (provided by the state), especially subjective rights" (Cohen and Arato, 1992, ix).

The Distinctiveness of Africa

How do the histories of African countries shape the orientations and capacities of civil society today? At first glance, African societies seem to possess few intermediary organizations that occupy the political space between household and state. Yet, on closer examination, one can discern cultural and religious institutions that express collective identities--such as clan, age-set, and brotherhood -- to which rural folk continue to grant allegiance. In addition, Africans constructed fresh forms of voluntary association in response to the disruptive effects of urbanization and the market economy during the colonial period. Sometimes these were updated expressions of long-standing informal solidarities (like ethnic welfare associations, prophetic movements, and agricultural work parties); in other cases they gave expression to new occupational and class identities (peasant movements, labor unions, teachers' associations). These associations became explicitly political, first by protesting the indignities of colonial rule and, later, by forming the building blocks of nationalist political parties.

After independence, African ruling elites gave top priority to state sovereignty and national security and sought to bring about "departicipation". Although they invested heavily in the construction of one-party and military regimes, elites were not always successful at discouraging autonomous organizations from taking root in civil society. Some leaders nipped them in the bud by incorporating them under the wing of governing parties; others banned them entirely. But, in many places, voluntary associations proved too strong to be subordinated and survived as an alternative institutional framework to officialdom.

Associational life took different forms in different countries: Christian churches in Kenya and Burundi, Islamic brotherhoods in Senegal and Sudan, lawyers' and journalists' associations in Ghana and Nigeria, farmer organizations in Zimbabwe and Kenya, and mineworkers' unions in Zambia and South Africa. But everywhere that independent associations survived they provided ordinary Africans with an outlet for the urge to combine in pursuit of shared goals.

The poor performance of planned economies in Africa gave an added impetus to autonomous activity beyond the purview of the state. As a means of evading the costs and inefficiencies of economic regulation, producers and traders chose increasingly to participate directly in "that part of the economy variously referred to as the second, parallel, informal, underground, black or irregular economy" (McGaffey, 1987, 2; Kasfir, 1984, 84). In scope and formality, trading networks ranged from ad hoc village markets to organized smuggling rings spanning international frontiers. By 1980, the size of the second economy in several African countries (e.g. Ghana, Uganda, and Zaire) was estimated to approach, if not exceed, the size of the official gross domestic product.

The fact that African citizens autonomously undertook a wide gamut of organized economic activity had profound political implications. As trade shifted to illegal or informal networks, taxes became difficult to collect and public revenues diminished, especially in valuable foreign exchange, thereby exacerbating the fiscal crisis of the state. Financially deprived governments had little option but to loosen restrictions on autonomous networks and organizations by permitting them to perform some of the functions previously monopolized by government. By the end of the 1980s, independent associations and alternative economic networks together provided a recruiting ground for a popular upsurge against post-colonial autocracy (Chazan 1982; Harbeson et.al. 1994).

Does the emergence of opposition to authoritarian rule in African countries signify the presence of strong civil societies? Certainly, civic actors in Africa derived new-found energy from the climate of political liberalization in the 1990s. In response to popular protest and donor pressure, African political leaders created political openings -- for example, by releasing political prisoners and abandoning one-party constitutions -- that improved the legal environment for free expression and association. There is considerable evidence that previously closed political space was occupied by genuine manifestations of civil society, namely by structures of associations, networks of communication, and norms of civic engagement. Let us briefly examine each of these elements empirically.

Associational Life. A couple of types of political association can be mentioned to illustrate the current explosion of associational life in Africa: civic organizations and national conferences. During the 1980s, a few courageous citizens (in Nigeria, Uganda, Zaire, Zambia and Zimbabwe among other places) established non-governmental organizations to monitor governmental human rights performance. By 1991, local chapters of Amnesty International operated openly in Benin, Sierra Leone and Togo, joining those already active in Zambia and Mauritius (although members in Sudan were forced to restrict their activities). Some such groups expanded their mandate to include election monitoring, for instance through the GERDESS network of intellectuals and professionals in francophone West Africa and through umbrella groups of churches in East Africa. By insisting on non-partisan oversight of government performance and electoral contests, civic associations have helped to keep governments honest and to educate people about citizenship.

Africa's greatest original contribution to civil society is the national conference, a form of political association that has been convened in more than half a dozen francophone states. A national conference is an assembly of national elites, between several hundred and several thousand strong, which includes representatives of all major segments of society and is often chaired by a church leader. The conference meets to address a country's political crisis and to attempt to formulate constitutional rules for political transition. A critical point comes when the conferees demand sovereignty to revise the constitution or, as in Benin and Congo, to conduct a public impeachment in which the sitting president is accused of corrupt practices and stripped of executive powers.

Public Communication. African journalists have been a driving force within civil society. Their new publications have thrust political opinions, previously censored as "dissident" or "subversive," into mainstream discourse. Even within government-owned media, journalists and consumers have sought the expression of alternative viewpoints as a counterweight to discredited official propaganda. For example, in an interesting case of liberalization without democratization, Tanzania has seen the introduction of almost half a dozen lively weekly newsmagazines in Swahili and English, all bemoaning the government's slow march to multiparty elections in 1995.

The international spread of new communications technologies, notably fax machines and satellite TV, has helped promote public political discourse. Authoritarian governments find difficulty in controlling these decentralized technologies and in preventing the dissemination of international news, information, and political values within their borders. Especially in volatile urban areas, African citizens obtain information from Cable News Network, Radio France International, and the British Broadcasting Corporation, sources which they say they trust more than government-owned media outlets. The fledgling opposition movement in Malawi has been organized partly through fax messages from exiled leaders in Zambia. And, in West Africa, the proceedings of the national conference in Benin were broadcast into neighboring Togo and Niger, perhaps emboldening pro-democracy forces there.

Civic Norms. Evidence for the emergence of a consensus around norms of democratic procedure and good governance is less tangible and more difficult to locate. One can point to the emergence of public debate about human rights, a subject that was almost nonexistent a decade ago but which Africans now feel compelled to talk about. Anti-corruption is another effective message for political mobilization, more effective probably than appeals to multiparty democracy. And, where free and fair elections have been conducted, incumbent leaders have usually been ousted, usually by a clear majority vote.

Nevertheless, voter turnout in transition elections has often been remarkably low, suggesting that citizens harbor deep levels of distrust towards politics and politicians. Moreover, the autonomous space beyond the state has its dark side: while "informal economies provide a critically important source of economic survival...they are also part of universe in where theft and violence are common currency" (Lemarchand, 1992, 188). Here, too, manifestations of spiritual power, like religion, witchcraft, and magic, can undercut efforts to build "reciprocal relationships built on an underlying normative consensus" (Hyden, 1992, 1).

What, then, do Africans think and feel about democracy and their own roles as citizens? While we know very little about this subject, some preliminary indications are available from focus groups and sample surveys conducted in conjunction with USAID's democratic governance project in Zambia. At least in this one country, a solid majority of citizens claim interest in politics, especially community affairs. They belong to voluntary associations, here usually Christian churches, but show limited enthusiasm for joining political parties. And, while the evidence is mixed, many survey respondents express a set of proto-democratic political values including moderate to high levels of interpersonal trust (including towards members of "other" ethnic groups) and attitudes of political tolerance that are supportive of basic human rights. At the same time, respondents display a predilection to defer to entrenched authority and a deep streak of cynicism about official corruption (Bratton and Katundu, 1993, i-ii). Much more comparative research is required in other African countries (and between men and women, urban and rural dwellers) before we can know whether these political attitudes, which on balance are supportive of a sense of civic community, are widespread.

On the basis of available evidence, a prima facie case can be made that institutions of civil society exist in some African countries, if only in fledgling form. By way of conclusion, let us assess the strengths and weaknesses of these institutions in the light of the distinctiveness of African settings.

On the positive side, there are elements of political culture in African countries that are conducive to building strong civic institutions. Because many Africans still draw their identities from collective social units like family, clan and ethnic group, there is a firm basis of group solidarity upon which to construct primary associations (Ekeh, 1975; Agbaje, 1992;

National Research Council, 1993). Moreover, to the extent that many Africans still emphasize norms of reciprocity in social relations, they possess a reservoir of social capital which can be invested in collective action (Hyden, 1992; Landell-Mills, 1992). The expansion of associational life in African countries has also cut across class lines, being equally if not more prevalent among economically marginal groups as among emergent middle classes. Politically mobilized groups share a widespread perception that incumbent leaders have neglected their political obligations to provide for the welfare of their followers. This perception has fueled a resurgence of demands for political accountability which is helpful in the construction, not just of civil society, but also of democracy. And, however tentatively, organized groups (usually based on occupational affiliations) have begun to project their preferences into the policy process. The best examples can be found in labor union representations over state regulation of collective bargaining and farmer union representations over land reform and agricultural pricing (e.g. Raker, 1992; Skalnes, 1993).

On the other hand, other aspects of the economic and cultural environments of African countries appear to be infertile ground for nurturing civil society.

As is well known, most African countries are beset by a long-term economic crisis characterized by shrinking output per capita, escalating indebtedness, and falling living standards. People who are preoccupied with meeting daily needs of economic survival and family welfare have neither the time nor inclination to devote themselves to civic and community affairs. Nor are financially strapped governments able to sustain the investments in education and adult literacy necessary to cultivate a web of public communication among well-informed citizens. Societies riven by wide and growing gaps between rich and poor are structurally ill-suited to the cultivation of norms of reciprocity and participation on which civil society is based. Indeed, the global association between stable democracy and advanced industrial economy suggests that democratic institutions (including civic institutions) are difficult to construct under conditions of mass economic privation and great social inequalities.

Reflecting the poverty of their clienteles, civic organizations in Africa suffer gross shortages of material resources: they own few organizational assets, operate with tiny budgets, and are always understaffed. Few precedents exist for mobilizing financial contributions through corporate sponsorship, user fees, or the payment of dues. Instead, civic organizations have usually turned to foreign donors to cover the costs of not only capital projects but also core operating expenses. Over-dependence on foreign funding has several pathological consequences for the development of voluntary organizations and, hence, for civil society. For example, the direction of accountability is reversed within the organization, with leaders reporting to donors rather than to members or clients. Moreover, reliance on funds from abroad can be a political liability, reducing the credibility of claims by associations to be authentic advocates for a domestic political constituencies and enabling host governments to dismiss them as agents of foreign interests.

Beyond economic constraints, a second consideration is culture. African countries also possess political cultures embedded under authoritarian regimes in the precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. At the risk of oversimplification, these cultures can be described as neopatrimonial. Neopatrimonialism originates in the African extended family, with the dominance of older males and strong interpersonal ties. It has been reinvented in the form of the "big men" and personal political relationships that pervade post-colonial African political institutions, including government bureaucracies. At the elite level, neopatrimonialism is manifest in the overcentralization of power ("one-man management"), arbitrary decision-making ("the rule of men"), and the use of public resources for personal advancement

("corruption"). At the mass level, neopatrimonial culture reveals itself in obeisance and deference to political superiors ("respect"), in conformity in group behavior ("government by consensus"), and in economic dependence upon wealthy individuals ("patronage").

As much as contesting this illiberal political culture, civic organizations in Africa tend to embody and to reproduce it. They are usually led by personalistic leaders who use the distribution of material rewards and inducements to build support around an ethnic, linguistic, or regional core. Once they have secured office, such leaders typically resort to arbitrary decision-making and resist initiatives for democratic control or leadership turnover within the organization. To the extent that such leaders encourage political linkages among followers, they promote "vertical" relationships between patron and subordinates rather than "horizontal" relationships among political equals. Needless to say, it is the latter sort of association that is most conducive to civic community (Putnam, 1993, 87). This is not to say that the ambitions of patrons always go unchallenged. The members of voluntary associations have sometimes been able to eject corrupt or unresponsive leaders or to break away to form splinter organizations. However, the establishment of internal democracy within civic organizations is an important prerequisite to their effectiveness as a force for political accountability in relation to the state.

Civil Society and Democratization

Further discussion is needed on the roles of civil society in democratization. Because civil society manufactures political consent, it is the source of the legitimation of state power. The right of any elite to exercise state power is ultimately dependent upon popular acceptance. This consensus -- the key political resource for those who wish to rule -- is manufactured by the institutions of civil society. In this way, civil society serves the "hegemonic" function of justifying state domination. For as long as civic actors grant consent, civil society exists in a complementary relationship to the state.

Over time, however, citizens may come to perceive that ruling elites are abusing the power granted them. A few brave individuals may launch an oppositional critique which, when circumstances permit, is taken up and popularized in informal social movements and perhaps eventually by leaders of established institutions. This discourse can vary in depth of opposition; it may criticize the foibles of particular incumbents, implicate the regime of governance that such leaders represent, or even question the structure of state power. But, in all cases, the functions of domination and hegemony become separated and counterposed. Opposition ideas gain "hegemony over society (even as) the state's domination over the economy -- and, even more, the police and the army -- remain intact" (Pelczynski, 1988, 371).

The legitimacy of a political leader's claim to exercise state power thus derives from civil society. Put another way, responsive and effective government can only be built on a foundation of civic community. In this essential observation lies what Putnam calls "the seeds for a theory of democratic governance" (1993, 87). Walzer concurs: "the quality of our political and economic activity and our national culture is intimately connected to the strength and vitality of associations" (1991, 298); and Cohen and Arato advise that political leaders "would do well, if they value their long-term legitimacy, to promote democratic institution-building in civil society, even if this seems to increase the number of social demands on them" (1992, 17).

Precisely how do the institutions of civil society contribute to democratization? USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) provides a useful list of three "demand -related activities" (Blair, 1993b, 6-8). First, civil action widens participation by

mobilizing marginalized groups into public life, especially the poor, women, and minorities. Second, the institutions of civil society protect citizens against excesses by the state by acting as a buffer against possible predatory behavior and by monitoring public performance on human rights abuses and corruption. Finally, civil society helps to guarantee political accountability, the "distinctive hallmark of democracy" (ibid., 7). It does so because civic institutions perform functions of communication, representation, and negotiation through which citizen preferences are heard and acted upon.

The roles that civil society plays vary according to the stage of the political transition process. It is now customary to distinguish at least four stages of regime change: pre-transition, liberalization, transition, and consolidation (e.g. Sorenson, 1993; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986).

Pre-transition describes the period in which the authoritarian regime has consolidated its rule and faces no significant political challenge. Authoritarian governments routinely emasculate political society by banning political parties and controlling elections. In response, political nonconformists, who can no longer operate openly, take refuge in the occupational associations and religious and educational organizations of civil society. Free political discourse may survive within these civic institutions during the pre-transition period, but it invariably assumes underground or disguised forms. Artists, intellectuals, or religious leaders become the sole purveyors of political criticism, which is usually cloaked in parody, jargon, or allegory. While street demonstrations may occur regularly, protesters usually focus on economic rather than explicitly political issues.

Political liberalization occurs when a ruling elite grants previously denied civil and political rights, marking an important departure from authoritarian practices and the onset of political transition. While liberalization may occur at the initiative of a progressive faction that splits the state elite, more commonly it is a response to escalating economic protest (Bratton and van de Walle, 1993; Cohen and Arato, 1993, 50). At this stage, protest is galvanized not only by denunciations of elite corruption but also by calls for multiparty democracy. Civil society comes to be dominated by loose social movements with an ill-defined reform agenda that focus almost exclusively on the ouster of incumbents. During this period, interim national leaders emerge from within the churches, professions, unions, and universities to head pre-party "fronts" like national committees, national conferences, and general strike coalitions.

A political transition is the interval between one regime and another. During a transition, political actors struggle to establish political rules that provide advantage, not only in the immediate contest over state power but also over any future redistribution of public resources. The critical moment of the transition occurs when the incumbent regime concedes that the rules of political competition can be changed to allow the formation of independent political parties. From this moment onward, and especially following the announcement of competitive elections, the initiative in the democratization shifts back from civil society into a reconstituted political society. Opposition politicians come out of hiding in civil society, or international exile, and rush to form political parties through which to mount a bid for state power.

Indeed, because full democratic transition requires the formation of organizations aimed at capturing power, it must involve political society. This is not to say that civil society becomes irrelevant during political transition. Far from it: in the turbulence of an election campaign, civil society becomes highly mobilized, only its role changes from partisan to neutral. Instead of providing a refuge of last resort for dissident politicians, actors in civil society are freed to take on truly "civic" functions for which they have a more natural aptitude. The prospect of

competitive elections suddenly raises a plethora of demands for citizen education, public communication, arbitration between contending parties, and prevention of electoral fraud. Inevitably, under previous monopolistic regimes, civic organizations never existed to perform these functions or were dormant. New organizations have to be urgently formed or revived in order to ensure elections are free and fair and that citizens are adequately informed to participate in them.

Political transitions sometimes lead to democracy, which is a set of rules to guarantee political participation and contestation including, at minimum, regular elections for national leaders. Other possible outcomes include liberalized or reinvigorated forms of autocracy, or anarchy. The consolidation of a regime begins when a political transition ends which, in the case of a democratic transition, is marked by the installation of a new government as the result of a free and fair election. Whether a democratic regime becomes consolidated depends upon the acceptance by all political actors, especially the losers of the election, of a new and stable set of political rules including the convocation of regular subsequent elections. It may take generations to consolidate a democracy. Regime consolidation can only be said to have occurred after significant threats of regime reversal (e.g, from the military or a "disloyal" opposition) have been effectively eliminated or contained.

The institutions of civil society have a crucial role to play in the consolidation of democracy. At the deepest levels of political culture, civic institutions include the political norms and values that underpin the rules of democratic competition. Democracy depends upon attachments among citizens to a matrix of civil liberties which they are willing to defend against encroachment by the executors of state power. At a more concrete level, civil society is the arena of voluntary associational life. A healthy democracy is founded on a plurality of organized social groups through which citizens learn the arts of associating together, practice the procedures of democratic governance, and express group interests to policy makers. It is through civic organizations that people participate in politics and development. Civil society also provides networks of communication among citizens, and between citizens and the state. Ideally, the media of communication are not monopolized by the ruling party or by any other single interest in society, but reflect a diversity of voices and opinions. The prime function of these media include educating citizens about public policy issues, improving the transparency of public decisions, and helping to hold public officials accountable.

In practice, civil societies do not generally perform well in the early stages of democratic consolidation. The reasons can be found in the dynamics of the democratization process, notably in the deflation of political energies that occurs immediately after transition. The new regime may draw civic leaders into leadership positions in government or party institutions, thereby effectively coopting and silencing them. Among citizens, the intense levels of political engagement that were whipped up during the election campaign cannot be sustained under normal political conditions. Indeed, political elites deliberately seek to defuse and contain the ebullience and unrealistic expectations of citizens. In addition, political factions which united around the common goal of ousting an authoritarian leader rediscover differences of interest that can divide, incapacitate, and even destroy civic organizations. And, in poor countries, many of the people who became politically active during the transition choose to withdraw again into the household realm in order to address pressing and neglected needs of economic survival.

In sum, the revival of political society and the conclusion of a political transition can have demobilizing consequences for civil society. The reinvigoration of civil society as a force for democratic governance over the long term is a major item for the post-transition agenda. As instruments of political consent, the institutions of civil society can either provide political

legitimacy to governments, or withhold it. Any political legitimacy won at the polls is a scarce resource which is easily dissipated and must be constantly renewed. Governments that are attempting a crash program of marketization are especially needy of democratic institutions in society that can educate citizens, build support, and divert opposition into constructive channels. Nowhere is this currently more true than in sub-Saharan Africa.

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