Drawing on examples from many nations, this article examines the difficulties confronting civil society in authoritarian environments, including political repression, legal repression, and threats. The article also discusses the preconditions for the reemergence of civil society where it has been suppressed.

INTRODUCTION

Legal thought, at least as embodied in international and regional human rights instruments and even in most national constitutions, assumes the universality of certain principles. The “four freedoms”—association, assembly, speech, and religion—are taken for granted as applicable, if not always applied, around the world. They form the basis of human rights campaigns, advocacy, and policy reforms, as well as one justification for intervening in the affairs of nations. For many people, these freedoms represent the foundation of participatory democratic government. Yet political and social structures, traditions, laws, and other forces that shape human behavior can restrict the growth and effectiveness of civil society. Some of these forces are benevolent. Others are not, and therefore conflict with the ideals of the “four freedoms.”

In most countries, civil society groups can be classified as civic movements or organizations; political parties; human rights movements; social assistance organizations; labor/trade unions; rural, agricultural and other workers’ cooperatives; independent professional and sectoral associations; independent journalism; cultural and arts groups; and faith-based groups and institutions.

Political and social forces can weaken civil society in several fashions. An inadequate civil society can be a legacy of patronage politics, especially rulers who monopolize economic, social, and political opportunities as a way of controlling people. Political entrepreneurs continue to dominate markets, including clandestine ones, and use this social domination to buy off members of mass movements.

The state is often responsible for stifling civil society. It is difficult if not impossible for civil society to emerge and grow in an authoritarian political environment. For example, state actors regularly use force to prevent indigenous communities from
organizing on sufficient scale to defend their interests. Without freedom of association, civil society cannot exist.

Why do rulers undermine civil society? Some are paranoid and will do anything to safeguard their interests. This is especially true where there are indications of possible military or social uprising against the government. In other cases, a state can exploit divisions in politics. For example, the citizens of many states cannot reach a consensus on how the state should be governed. This is especially true in Africa, as well as in the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and Central Asia.

A country’s political environment defines the spaces and the issues on which nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) can operate and advance. This article explores how these restrictions play out in less-than-democratic states, and how civil society can sometimes endure and ultimately reemerge.

THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL MILIEU WITHIN WHICH CSOs OPERATE

In democratizing countries, civil society should ideally function as a school in which citizens learn democratic thinking and acting, tolerance of diversity and pluralism, mutual acceptance, willingness to compromise, trust, and cooperation. Civil society organizations should serve as advocates, influencing government both to adopt positions supported by their members and to follow rules that facilitate open, free, and fair political debate and decisions. Thus, a crucial element of democratization is the creation of organizations that can act independently and confront the government, either to hold it to account or to influence policy.

Constricted political space, however, commonly limits CSOs to matters outside the explicit political arena, including democracy and democratization. On this point, Oloka-Onyango (2000, p. 23) rightly ponders whether genuine democracy can be realized in a political framework that monopolizes discussions of governance, suppresses organized opposition, and curtails political space.

Such a framework has several consequences. Many CSO officials admit that they do not want to confront a repressive government; others say that they wish to avoid matters considered controversial. As such, many CSOs avoid democratization and governance issues and dwell on “soft issues,” such as women and children’s rights and developmental topics. The suppression of dissent also explains why governments are more receptive to service-providing CSOs than to advocacy ones. Restrictions imposed by existing law, as well as potential restrictions embodied in pending legislation, further keep CSOs and NGOs on a short leash. Taken together, these factors forestall free discussions of political matters, and thereby prevent civil society from playing its proper role as intermediary between groups of citizens and the wielders of political power.

Uganda provides a useful case study. Ugandan CSOs are relatively young. Most of them were founded after the NRM regime captured power in 1986. Most of these organizations, further, have a narrow social base and thin geographical coverage. In particular, most leading CSOs are concentrated in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, and conduct only limited activities elsewhere. The middle class plays a prominent role in the most visible organizations, too. Finally, the bulk of CSOs are involved in service delivery and other relatively uncontentious activities.
Uganda does provide relative leeway for forming and operating CSOs, as well as a relatively free press. Nonetheless, advocacy CSOs face a difficult time, because of restrictions on political spaces. CSOs active on issues of democratization, governance, human rights, and accountability are especially affected. Consequently, civil society is largely limited to topics and approaches that reinforce the status quo, or at least pose no threat to it.

Before 1986, Uganda was marked by tyrannical regimes and economic collapse. Although the political environment has improved, the present regime does not seem fully committed to democracy. The government continues to restrict political pluralism and shows intolerance toward serious political competition. On many occasions, the government has prevented CSOs from advancing democratization and governance goals. Now, a proposed NGO Registration (Amendment) Bill threatens to impose new regulations on the registration and activities of CSOs. This problem is compounded by a reluctance of CSOs to confront the state on certain issues. For these reasons, CSOs remain largely outside the arenas of politics and democratization.

The classic model of civil society requires a meaningful institutional separation between citizens and their organizations, on the one hand, and a relatively autonomous bureaucratic state, on the other. Sub-Saharan Africa does not satisfy that requirement, according to Patrick Chabal (Chabal and Daloz, 1999). There, no sharp dichotomy can be drawn between state and civil society. Rather, the two interpenetrate each other.

Chabal argues that African societies are essentially plural, fragmented, and above all, organized along vertical lines. Sociopolitical cleavages usually reflect factional divisions, which arise primarily because of competition for scarce resources. In general, vertical divisions remain more significant than horizontal bonds or ties of solidarity between those who are similarly employed or professionally linked. That helps limit the effectiveness of associations charged with promoting the common good. Chabal holds that questions of identity or community often undermine attempts at occupational or professional unity, and further, that the business of politics is usually conducted along informal, vertical channels linking the elites with the rest of the population, such as patron-client networks and communal organizations. The primacy of vertical and personalized ties precludes a functional civil society. Assertions that civil society exists in sub-Saharan Africa derive more from wishful thinking or ideological bias than from a careful analysis of conditions.

Further, such assertions suggest that African political systems are more similar to their Western counterparts than they really are. It is misleading to talk of a politically salient cleavage between “state” and (civil) “society.” Instead of focusing on such vague categories, one should pay attention to the behavior of the main political actors. Private and public domains blur, and the few embryonic societal movements opposing central power are limited in their organizational capacities.

Chabal’s points apply to Uganda. Vertical relations and bonds of patronage are common, and they help explain why civil society actors hardly ever challenge the state. In addition, the distribution of socioeconomic resources is highly unequal in Uganda. As a result, the system of political coordination tends to produce a “mobilization of bias” and thereby provides opportunities for powerful elites to influence policy by interacting with
their political and governmental counterparts. The proliferation of NGOs in Uganda is not evidence to the contrary. It reflects donors’ practice of channeling more resources outside the state, not an increased political importance of civil society.

The experience of some countries suggests that civil society can exist even though it does not follow the classic model. Under this theory, civil society need not be totally independent from the government; the key is to manage the relationship between civil society and political power. In Spain as well as some former communist countries, civil society once meant political society, though it now refers to the network of voluntary associations, markets, and public spaces outside the direct control of the state. For Perez-Diaz this distinction is critical, because a civil society can be fostered, in a limited sense at least, by the state.

**LEGAL FRAMEWORK APPLICABLE TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS**

Repressive governments often closely regulate the registration process for CSOs, and thereby discourage the formation of organizations, particularly advocacy groups. Tactics include exercising vast discretion over registration; making registration expensive, inconvenient, or burdensome; delaying registration decisions unduly; and requiring organizations to reregister every few years, allowing the government to revisit the issue of whether a given organization should exist.

In Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, and Algeria, regulations governing registration are vague and leave great discretion to the officials. CSOs are sometimes denied registration, and other times subjected to long delays or repeated requests for information. In Azerbaijan, registrations have been de facto suspended as a result of poor implementation of the registration laws.

In Belarus, the government in recent years has adopted a series of laws restricting both public gatherings and CSO activity. Among other powers, the laws give the government substantial discretion over registration. A National Commission on Registration of Public Associations advises the Ministry of Justice on whether an organization should be permitted to register, in a process that is not transparent. Applicants have waited for more than a year for a response to their applications (the law provides for one month), only to be denied registration without explanation.

Except for its restrictions on political parties under the Constitution and the laws on sedition, Uganda’s legal framework at first appears to provide sufficient space for forming and operating CSOs. The constitutional framework supports the existence and free operation of civil society organizations. CSOs in Uganda generally operate under the 1995 Constitution of Uganda, which guarantees the right of association and recognizes the existence and role of civil society organizations. The relevant constitutional provisions are as follows (emphasis added):

**Principle 5 (ii)** of the National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy provides that “the state shall guarantee and respect the independence of nongovernmental organizations which protect and promote human rights.”

**Article 29(1)** provides for “the freedom of association which shall include the freedom to form and join association or unions, including trade unions and political and other civic organizations.”
Article 38(2) provides that “every Ugandan has a right to participate in peaceful activities to influence the policies of Government through civic organizations.”

Article 269 provides for limiting certain activities of political organizations, which was translated into the exasperating Political Organizations Act. The restrictions against political organizations in these laws include rules against operating branch offices, holding public rallies, and conducting any activities that may interfere with the Movement political system for the time being. Because of the restrictions, the traditional political parties operate more or less like CSOs, including The Free Movement (TFM), the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), and Uganda Peoples’ Congress and Democratic Party, which oppose the hegemony of the Movement and take political stances. The constitutional article and the Act have been widely condemned by the opposition parties, which consider them to violate fundamental freedoms of association and expression.

Besides the Constitution, CSOs are governed by the NGO Registration Statute 1989. This statute provides for the registration and regulation of NGOs. It defines an NGO as “a Non-Governmental Organization established to provide voluntary services including religious, educational, literary, scientific, social, or charitable services to the community or any part thereof” (Ugandan NGO Registration Statute No. 5, 1989, Section 13). The statute further provides that no organization can operate in Uganda unless it has registered with the Board, subject to such conditions and directions as the Board may think fit.

However, the government has tabled bills that threaten to limit the general freedom and operations of CSOs. These bills address the suppression of terrorism, the registration of NGOs, and the regulation of political parties:

The Bill on the Suppression of Terrorism 2001 contains several provisions that threaten fundamental freedoms of expression and liberty. In its present form, the bill is inimical to human rights in general, and it potentially endangers individuals and groups in the opposition. The proposed law expands the definition of terrorism and increases the number of offenses related to terrorism; imposes a mandatory sentence of death for the offense of terrorism and raises the penalties for offenses related to it, including the forfeiture of assets and other property belonging to associations deemed terrorist groups; increases ministerial powers to declare organizations terrorist; introduces wide powers for surveillance and interception of communications, even without any evidence that the individuals affected are involved in terrorist activities; and introduces an offense for displaying support for terrorism in a public place.

The NGO Registration (Amendment) Bill 2000 seeks to restrict space for NGOs and increase control by the state. Key provisions include a requirement for a permit on top of registration; a prohibition against registering NGOs whose objectives are in “contravention of any government plan, policy or public interest”; penalties and fines for individuals in NGOs; an NGO Registration Board composed of officials from the State and security organs; and appeals of non-registration or canceled registration to the Minister of Internal Affairs. The
bill violates the constitution to the extent that it threatens the autonomy of civil society organizations.

The Political Parties Bill 2001, in Article 269, stifles the operations of parties and negates political pluralism. The delay in passing a law that legitimately regulates the activities of political parties is a cause of concern to many CSOs in general and political parties in particular.

CSOs were not involved in preparing the Bill on the Suppression of Terrorism or the amendment to the NGO Registration Law. Instead, their involvement was reactive, arising only after the bills had been published. All in all, the government today interacts with CSOs primarily when the state stands to benefit. In many cases, too, CSOs rely on the expertise of technical consultants outside their membership, which has two negative consequences: the government does not take them seriously, and they cannot effectively and sustainably channel and or represent popular opinion or influence government policies.

Uganda is not unique. Over the past year, several countries have introduced legislation aimed at weakening civil society. In the most restrictive political environments, governments do not grant the right to associate or form organizations at all:

- Saudi Arabia has no law governing CSOs. As a result, the few organizations that exist were established by royal decree or operate under government control.
- In Libya, the law does not recognize any right to associate.
- The Russian Duma passed on first reading a bill that would have barred foreigners from participating in Russian civil society organizations; prohibited foreign organizations from operating branches in Russia; and given the government unchecked powers over CSOs, including a requirement that it be notified of such informal groups as neighborhood associations (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2006, p. 76). However, some of the more restrictive features were eliminated through the efforts of Russian civil society leaders, combined with support from international organizations and diplomatic pressure from the United States, the European Commission, and others. Nonetheless, the law ultimately adopted on January 17, 2006, gave the Russian government significantly greater control over NGO activity.
- China, finally, provides no legally guaranteed right for CSOs to exist. Nevertheless, civil society in China exists to some extent through the ingenuity of its CSOs, which, for example, often register as different forms of organizations.

Some governments restrain civil society by limiting the access of CSOs to foreign funding, apparently as a means to reduce foreign influence.

- Zimbabwe in 2004 enacted a law that prohibits local CSOs engaged in “issues of governance” from accepting foreign funds, and bars foreign
CSOs involved in these activities from registering. Upon introducing the bill, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe declared that “we cannot allow CSOs to be conduits or instruments of foreign interference in our national affairs.” Mugabe ultimately declined to sign the controversial bill, citing “one or two issues he wanted to be addressed,” but there is concern that the bill will be revived.

- In Eritrea, the government introduced CSO Administration Proclamation No.145/2005 that prohibits the United Nations and similar international agencies from funding CSOs under most circumstances, and requires all donor funds to flow through government ministries. The proclamation also imposes taxes on food aid and other donations, outlaws CSO work in fields other than relief and rehabilitation, and increases reporting requirements.

- In Uzbekistan in 2004, the government assumed greater control over foreign funding of CSOs by requiring them to deposit funds in one of two government-controlled banks, thereby allowing monitoring and control of all money transfers. Within a short time after enactment of these provisions, the government had obstructed the transfer of over 80 percent of foreign grants to CSOs. Worse, the system is administered according to unwritten policies and oral instructions, making it difficult for CSOs to follow the rules or appeal adverse decisions. More recently, the government has suspended the operations of some foreign democracy and governance organizations that have partnered with and funded local groups, and has refused to register others. On May 3, 2007, Uzbekistan published a new Law on Charity, which grants the Cabinet of Ministers the right to monitor and control the use of charitable donations from foreigners, including international and foreign organizations.

- On February 20, 2006, the National Assembly of Sudan passed a draconian bill that restricts the work of NGOs in Sudan and grants discretionary power to the government over NGO operations.

- On December 8, 2006, Peruvian President Alan Garcia signed into law amendments to Peru’s Law Creating the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation (APCI), which grants APCI the authority to “prioritize” NGO activity with “national development policy and the public interest” and to regulate the flow of foreign funding to human rights defenders and other Peruvian NGOs that receive international technical cooperation.

These events are part of a regulatory backlash against CSOs throughout the world.

**POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE REBIRTH OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

Civil society can sometimes emerge under authoritarian rule through an iterative “political construction” approach that combines political opportunities, social energy, and scaling up. However, civil society reformists, with a greater concern for political legitimacy and thus a preference for negotiation over confrontation, may conflict with
hard-line colleagues over whether and how to proceed. If and when cracks in the system appear, civil society organizations often try to occupy these spaces from below, demanding broader access to the state while trying to defend their capacity to articulate their own interests autonomously. These efforts usually provoke an authoritarian backlash, which ends the cycle of opening.

Scaling up in civil society organizations is especially important for representing the interests of dispersed populations, which have the greatest difficulty in defining common interests and are the most vulnerable to “divide and conquer” efforts from above. If CSOs do successfully scale up, they are still vulnerable to the “iron law of oligarchy,” because dispersed populations have little capacity to monitor the activities of their leadership and hold them accountable. Accordingly, regional organizations are vital for representing the interests of dispersed and oppressed groups and thereby offsetting the power of authoritarian elites. These organizations are more effective through overcoming locally confined solidarities, exercising representative bargaining power, and providing access to information. Regional collective action, however, often is most likely to be targeted for repression.

Cuba exercised strict controls over CSOs, even going so far as to form its own organizations. However, the resurgence of civil society was credited with playing a critical role in Cuba’s so-called Third Wave of democracy (1974-1987). Social movements, human rights organizations, churches, and other forms of organized “people power” mobilized repressed populations against authoritarian government. The emergence of civil society in Cuba in the context of systemic crisis can be compared with developments in other communist states, including the handful of regimes that resisted the democratization of the Fourth Wave. Many observers declare the Fourth Wave, which came unexpectedly with the collapse of European communist regimes and the dismantling of the Soviet Union, a triumph of civil society against the state. Vladimir Tismaneanu (1992, p. xiii), for example, asserts that the main cause of the East European revolutions was “the rise and ripening of civil societies in countries long dominated by totalitarian Leninist parties.”

Civil societies arise from the increasing complexity of social and economic life and the proliferation of interests, identities, and causes. A particular civil society is thus the result of a unique combination of structures, cultures and values, and of notions of public versus private spheres. When civil society organizations emerge and seek autonomy from a communist state, however, the regime sees a challenge to its very coherence and legitimacy. Civil society cannot emerge or reemerge unless the onerous conditions of foundational regimes are alleviated. The “reformation” of classic communist regimes took place in the wake of the death of the founding leaders, such as Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh.

After the United Nations Transitional Authority organized multiparty elections in Cambodia in 1993, authoritarian forms of government gradually shifted toward limited political development. Setbacks occurred, however, including the Cambodian People's Party’s assuming a role in government between 1993 and 1998 despite holding fewer seats than the party Funcinpec. In addition, the government did not separate powers or respect human rights, and continued to use violent or military means to resolve conflicts. This last point was illustrated by the March 1997 grenade attack and the July 1997
fighting between the two parties. However, the 1998 multiparty elections and other developments indicate that Cambodian civil society is rising.

Despite strict controls, civil society continues to emerge in China. With the disengagement of the Chinese state from many sectors of the public life, citizens have empowered themselves, creating associations to promote their economic, cultural, religious, and other interests. Some of these associations operate illegally, underground, but many operate publicly and accept a certain degree of government control.

**PRECONDITIONS FOR REBIRTH OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

The systemic crisis that caused civil society to sprout in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, according to Weigle and Butterfield (1992, pp. 5, 18), resulted from the regimes’ failures “to adequately perform self-defined functions of value formation and interest representation” and “to respond to needs of a complex society and modern economy.” They describe four stages in the development of civil society:

- **Defensive**: private individuals and independent groups actively or passively defend their autonomy from the party-state.
- **Emergent**: independent social groups or movements pursue limited goals in a widened public sphere sanctioned or conceded by the reforming party-state.
- **Mobilizational**: independent groups or movements undermine the legitimacy of the party-state by offering alternative forms of governance to a politicized society.
- **Institutional**: publicly supported leaders enact laws guaranteeing autonomy of social action, which lead to a contractual relationship between the state and society regulated eventually by free elections.

Each stage embodies complex characteristics and sequences of events. The first two stages are shaped to a great extent by the shared characteristics of communist party regimes, while the last two depend largely on historical precedent, political culture, nationalism, and the level of institutional development. To understand how the process is initiated, one must examine the nature of the regime, the severity of the systemic crisis, the capabilities of the state, the status of societal initiative, the political culture, and the historical trajectory.

How does civil society reemerge in states that have eliminated it? The most important preconditions are the survival of independent thought and of some vestige of prerevolutionary patterns of social organization.

Foundational communist systems eliminated opposition and dissolved independent sources of power that might rival the “Communist Party” (used generically to cover all political parties in power), such as other political parties, trade unions, professional associations, religious organizations, and vestiges of the preceding regime. Preexisting non-communist organizations were usually banned, co-opted, or merged into new entities created by the state, while the majority of the population was inducted into mass organizations that served as transmission belts for the party. Alternative visions survived only by hibernating or dissimulating acquiescence. The costs of individual or collective action were very high, especially in the mobilizational periods when opposition
could lead to exile, death or lengthy imprisonment in the gulags (see Courtois, Werth, et.
al., 1998).

Stalinist Europe provides examples. With the exception of pockets of anti-communist guerrilla activity that lasted into the early 1950s, collective resistance was either passive, in such nonpolitical forms as cultural, ethnic, and religious activity, or spontaneous and violent, such as the riots of 1953 in East Germany and Poland.

When reforms came, their main characteristics were the shift of political power away from the maximum leader toward the party apparatus, a process in keeping with Lenin’s concept of democratic centralism; the replacement of widespread state terror with subtler, “hegemonic” forms of social domination; and the renegotiation of the coercive compact between state and society. This is the environment in which the defensive stage of emergence occurs.

The defensive stage is actually a period of complex interactions that produce conditions in which the public can articulate divergent views. The defensive stage occurs in three steps: decompression, liberalization, and retrenchment. The first signs of life are triggered by social decompression, such as the elimination of mass terror and the reinforcement of the private, individual domain. The party-state relieves pressure without making substantial reforms. It may relax the enforcement of repressive laws, tone down its ideological rhetoric, and cautiously tolerate new cultural expression. Those seeds of civil society that have survived the violence of the communist takeover and the terror of the mobilizational phase begin to sprout during this period, particularly among intellectuals and religious groups.

Put differently, the catalyst for emergence is a change in the political regime that lowers the costs of individual and collective self-organization and opens public space for participation. The change may result from conscious pressures to reform, the diminution or erosion of state capabilities, conjunctural conditions that have unintended consequences, or some combination of the three. At this point, divergences or dissents from communism begin to publicly appear from above and from below.

Divergence from above in communist-type polities emerges from party elites, first as revisionism and later as dissidence. Revisionism is a critique of the party from within in order to perfect it, usually appealing to communist utopian ideals to criticize bureaucratism and other “deformations” of socialism, as with Leon Trotsky and Rudolf Bähr. Dissidence, by contrast, questions the foundations of the party. Although dissidence is confined at first to urban intellectuals, it serves as an example to potential activists and the community at large.

Divergence from below emerges as dissent or resistance in the social realm, motivated by political, economic, social, religious, ethnic, or national differences with the authorities (Ionescu, 1967, p. 179). It commonly begins among the lower-status intelligentsia and students, whose reasons are political or ideological, and tends to aggregate in educational and cultural organizations. Ironically, the dissent often breeds in institutions created by the state, and many of the new dissidents are youthful products of the new order. The form of social resistance depends to some extent on the type of grievance. Work-related complaints might spawn strikes, for example, and restrictions on political space can lead to demonstrations. Whatever the form, social resistance can
organize through traditional networks and surviving prerevolutionary institutions, such as churches and fraternal organizations.

Liberalization can follow decompression. Liberalization involves actual reforms that permit a pluralization of social life and address the economic shortcomings endemic to communist party-states. Thomas F. Remington (1993) states that a theory of transition from communism should take into account how the regime and the society “influence and penetrate each other and how that relationship changes during the transition itself.” This period permits the articulation of revisionism and dissent in more active or public ways, often with the tacit assent of reformist party elites and sometimes with the open adoption of revisionist agendas, as with Prague Spring.

The continuation or expansion of reform depends on a number of factors, but the perception of regime elites is central. Their perspective helps determine the regime’s tolerance of opposition and a self-organizing society. Regime elites will stay the course if they see that changes in the coercive compact enhance political power and regime legitimacy. Early successes might even lead to deeper reforms, which allow civil society to advance to the emergent phase.

However, where the regime elites sense danger, retrenchment—a reversal of either decompression or liberalization—becomes likely. The result is a systemic crisis in which the regime typically clamps down on dissent and on independent economic and social activity. If elites can maintain unity in the systemic crisis, they can re-equilibrate through force or the threat of force, and later renegotiate the coercive compact with the population. If regime elites split and cannot resolve the impasse, however, a regime breakdown is likely to occur. If an embryonic civil society exists, a transition to democracy may be possible.

Where the seeds of civil society exist, according to Ariel Hidalgo (1994, pp. 46-47), the social contradictions repressed by legal means will, by necessity, emerge illegally, at the margins. Despite a rigid totalitarian structure, social forces that contest the regime are inevitable, such as parallel trade unions, human rights committees, and independent cultural, religious, and environmental associations. Thus, even under totalitarianism, an opposition can arise with the proper preconditions. Hidalgo writes with regard to Cuba’s systemic crisis of social domination starting in the late 1980s, which led to the proliferation of dissident, opposition, and independent social organizations.

Guillermo O’Donnell (1988) writes that “a crisis of social domination is a crisis of the state in society”—indeed, “the supreme political crisis”—because “the state is failing to guarantee the reproduction of basic social relations and, with them, of the system of social domination” (p. 26). Political reforms led to increasing autonomy from the state for individuals, groups, and organizations. In his landmark study of the political economy of communist systems, János Kornai (1992, p. 569) observes:

Reforming tendencies increase the autonomy of individuals, groups, and organizations in several respects. This applies to independent political movements, associations in society, private businesses, self-governing local authorities, self-managed firms, state owned firms that become more independent in accordance with the ideas of market socialism, and so on. Various degrees of autonomy and subordination appear, but within them the
weight of autonomy grows as a result of the reform, and as it increases, so the totalitarian power of the central leadership decreases. Once some degree of autonomy has taken place, it becomes a self-generating process....

Despite decades of repression and the exile of the most prerevolutionary civil society leaders, as in China, independent thought and key prerevolutionary institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church can survive. Religious practice was the only public form of dissent tolerated in China, albeit under significant restrictions.

The inherently uneven “rebirth” of civil society, especially under authoritarian rule, often reflects the politics of fear. The fear of retribution, whether subjective, objective, or both, shapes the landscape of political opportunity within which individuals and groups act. Those who work to reduce the fear of retribution can make a powerful difference. Concerted action can sometimes, to some degree, overcome the legacies of history. No matter how limited or how personal a manifestation of independence is, some authorities will fear it as a defiance of the ruling ideology and a threat to their exercise of supreme power. This explains what can seem like a bizarre and paranoid response. However nonpolitical it is, an activity might turn into a political one, and officials treat it as such (Skilling, 1989, pp. 73-74). Consequently, seemingly innocuous activities can lead to jail or exile or even death.

Political prisons, however, can serve as greenhouses for dissident and opposition thought. The detention facilities in which dissidents and opposition leaders have been tortured in Uganda serve as an example. As Ariel Hidalgo (1994) writes, even though the prison organizations do not last long, their birth can show the possibility, even in the narrow confines of prison, of the pluralism of civic organizations that can one day develop into an independent civic movement throughout the country.

As stated earlier, once this pressure mounts, the government may allow slight changes in state-society relations by permitting the formation of NGOs, so long as they refrain from active involvement in the political arena. But the line may be difficult to hold. In Cuba, for example, the government’s new discourse on “socialist civil society” and “nongovernmental organizations” has encouraged dissident and opposition groups, which have adopted and adapted the model in their struggle for democratization and political change.

The number of organizations, their geographic distribution, and the size of their membership demonstrate the persistence of activists despite the repression, privations, and machinations of government intelligence. Where the organizations at first cannot advance beyond the margins, their causes can include not just the repressive nature of the state, but also facets affecting the civil society groups themselves, including a lack of material and logistical support, a lack of trust, and the lack of access to media. Then, through one of the mechanisms highlighted above, an authentic civil society may gradually emerge.

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