

RESTRICTED SPACES: CIVIL SOCIETY, AUTHORITARIANISM, AND AFRICA

Symposium sponsored by the Cornell Institute for African Development (IAD) and Sahel Consortium

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Abstract

Many governments around the globe have intensified restrictions on civil society. Authoritarian governments, in particular, are becoming more forceful in limiting civic space and in violating international norms which protect freedom of association. From 2015 to 2016 alone, 64 restrictive laws were adopted on civil society in both democratic and undemocratic countries (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law). The Washington-based [International Center for Not-for-Profit Law](#), or ICNL, has identified 120 laws and regulations that have been enacted by 70 governments since 2012 that limit NGOs' access to financing and the ability of citizens to organize and manage them.

"We've seen a paradigm shift in the view of civil society in the past 20 years," says David Moore, ICNL's vice president for legal affairs. "There is a perception, promoted by some governments, that civil society is somehow 'other,' seeking to undermine national goals and priorities." According to the USAID Sustainability Index for Sub-Saharan Africa "in many countries, civil society, especially those engaged in advocacy or human rights work, face significant and often vague restrictions on their operations."

Because of an absence of an agreed-upon international definition of terrorism, counter-terrorism legislations have been adopted by over 140 governments since September 11, 2001. Legislations from various avenues seek to restrict civil society activities by requiring governmental notification and approval to intrusive oversight. Democracy is defined more by the ability of the people to defend their participatory rights when these are being grievously violated by government than by free and fair elections and other institutional forms. As its sociological counterpart, civil society is an

essential element in fostering and maintaining democracy. Civil society does more than act as a counterforce against the abuse of power by government. It also improves the quality of governance by (a) a democratic government, faced with the checking force of an activist and virile civil society cannot but be responsive to the needs of the people for good governance; (b) a strong, powerful civil society can also exert a moral and disciplinary influence in ensuring the observance by government of standards of public morality and accountability, and (c) an active civil society can identify, package, and articulate the interests, needs and demands of the society or of particular sectors in it, and by forcing them upon the attention of the government, thereby facilitating “political communication” between the state and society, especially as regards demands which otherwise might remain dormant or be expressed in fragmentary or ineffective ways.” It has been observed that “building and sustaining a free society is like a three –legged stool: One leg is a democratic government, the second leg is a free market economy and the third is civil society-civil associations, religious institutions, voluntary efforts NGOs, and individual acts of citizenship that together weave the fabric of democratic life.”

According to a recent study by Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (March 2018) “there is an abundance of evidence that a diverse and dynamic civil society is vital to the health and strength of democracy, and to the national security of a country. Civil society plays an integral role in countering violent extremism and terrorism through delegitimizing terrorist narratives.”

The rise of authoritarianism and the resulting restriction of space for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) create fertile ground for violence and conflict. In some parts of the world, such as in the Sahara-Sahel region, militarization and fragmentation of societies is intensifying (Metelits, 2016) and destroying already fragile local economic infrastructures, causing massive displacements and insecurity.

The seeming retreat of the international community in promoting and defending democratic values has brought about a rise in populism. The pushback against so-called external interference and CSOs has become the order of the day and nationalism is emerging as an alternative to globalization.

Against this background, the Institute for African Development in collaboration with the Sahel Consortium will host a symposium on **Restricted Spaces: Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Africa**. Sub themes will include:

- International NGOs and Local Government Relationships
- Nature, Role and Importance of Civil Society in a Democracy
- Weaknesses of Civil Society in African Countries
- Civil Society, and a Free Society
- Governance and Constitutional Restraint
- NGOs and Public Interest litigation
- NGOs and Gender Rights
- NGOs Role in Elections and Election Monitoring
- Political Institutions and Democracy
- Backsliding Democracy in Africa and NGOs
- The International Community, Humanitarian Responses and NGOs
- Civil Society, Displacement and Security
- The Right to Health and Civil Society

Abstract Submission

The Institute for African Development (IAD) and the Sahel Consortium symposium committee invite submissions of abstracts on the above-mentioned theme. Proposals must be no more than a page in length; single spaced, and must have the name, title, and institutional or organizational affiliation and full contact details of the person or persons submitting the abstract. Deadline for the submission of proposals/abstracts in **January 20, 2019**. Submitted proposals should be sent to Jackie Sayegh jsb25@cornell.edu at the Institute for African Development, (IAD)

Funding Support

Funding is available to assist presenters in paying for travel expenses and lodging at Cornell. If multiple contributors have authored one abstract, IAD/Sahel Consortium committee will assist only one contributor to travel to Cornell for the symposium. Proceedings from the symposium will be published as a book.

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