The Political Activities of NGOs and Nonprofit Organizations:  
Comparative Perspectives from Diverse Regions of the World

Mark Sidel¹, Doug Rutzen², David Moore², Aldo Panfichi³, Alison Dunn⁴, Saad Eddin Ibrahim⁵

¹University of Iowa, Iowa City, United States, ²International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), Washington, DC, United States, ³Departamento de Ciencias Sociales, Lima, Peru, ⁴Newcastle Law School, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom, ⁵unknown, Cairo, Egypt

Research problem to be addressed and the aim of the research

Restrictions on the political activities of NGOs and nonprofit organizations are increasing around the world. A major recent report from the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) states that "[i]n many countries around the world, government leaders are speaking out against the engagement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in "political activities" and thereby seeking to justify legal restrictions imposed on the NGO sector. In recent years we have witnessed restrictive laws and regulations proposed or enacted in several countries including Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela, among others."¹

These developments – restricting political activities of NGOs and putting them under state control – have been most prominent in Russia, but they have also occurred or have been proposed in many other countries as well. This panel will focus on identifying the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and the forms of that control, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area. The panel will focus on developments in the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

Research question

Focusing on the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, and Asia, the panel will focus on the research questions of identifying the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits and the forms of that control, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area.

Theories and concepts that inform the research

Theories and concepts that inform this work include international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), as well as theories and concepts underlying the nonprofit sector. These will inform discussion on the panel.

¹ ICNL, Political Activities of NGOs: International Law and Best Practices (ICNL, 2009). See also Catherine Shea and David Moore, Civil Society Under Threat: Common Legal Barriers and Potential Responses, USAID 2005 Sustainability Index.
**Research methodology and design**

Each panelist will focus on presenting information on the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits and the forms of that control in the region where they work, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area. Each panelist will be asked to provide a short paper on these issues.

**Key theoretical and/or empirical findings**

The key theoretical and empirical findings from this panel will likely focus on the forms of regulation of NGOs and the nonprofit sector, including the distinction between civil and common law countries; the role played by various forms of control and restriction of political activities, including statutory restrictions, tax-based restrictions; organizational registration; permitted activities; different forms of restrictions for such more narrowly defined groups as registered charities; the relationship between political activities and advocacy, and restrictions on both; the question of expenditures for political activities and advocacy; differential restrictions on non-charitable, not-for-profit organizations and charities (public benefit organizations) (as in England and Wales); the administration of restrictions through executive, judicial or other agencies; the issue of "political purpose"; any particular or special restrictions on foundations or other philanthropic entities; the question of foreign funding and its links to issues of political activity and advocacy;

The panel discussion, and findings from the panel, will be organized to focus on several themes that also are consistent with the themes discussed in the recent, major ICNL report. They include: The forms of NGO and nonprofit activity; Definitions of political activities and lobbying activities; Issues of legislative and regulatory reform (including advocating with government, the legislative branch, and other groups); Awareness raising activities; Non-partisan election monitoring; partisan political activities; and foreign funding.
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The regulation of the public policy activities of CSOs is an extremely complex task. There is a broad spectrum of possible conduct; ranging from educational activities designed to raise awareness to supporting a certain political party or candidate, with a myriad of other activities in-between. A cursory list includes:

1) **civic education** to promote general public interest in an issue or civic mindedness in general (such as volunteerism or philanthropy);

2) **advocacy activities** to protect the rights and promote the interest of specific groups of people – e.g. the physically handicapped, the elderly, ethnic minorities or women;

3) **legislative activities** to promote the success or failure of a bill, either undeveloped or being considered in a legislative body; and

4) **partisan activities** to support the success or failure of a political party, candidate for partisan political office, or partisan political group.

This panel will focus on identifying the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and the forms of that control, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the nature of political activity restrictions, the means of resisting them and best practices in this area. The panel will focus on developments in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and other regions.

**Research question**

Focusing on the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and other regions, the panel will concentrate on the research questions of identifying the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits and the forms of that control, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area. My presentation will seek to provide a global perspective on the issue.

**Theories and concepts that inform the research**

Theories and concepts that inform this work include international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), as well as theories and concepts underlying the nonprofit sector. These will inform discussion on the panel.

**Research methodology and design**

Each panelist, including me, will focus on presenting information on the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits and the forms of that control in the region where they work, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area. I will provide a short paper on these issues.

**Key theoretical and/or empirical findings**

The key theoretical and empirical findings from this panel will likely focus on the forms of regulation of NGOs and the nonprofit sector, including the distinction between civil and common law countries; the role played by various forms of control and restriction of political activities, including statutory restrictions, tax-based restrictions; organizational registration; permitted activities; different forms of restrictions for such more narrowly defined groups as registered charities; the relationship between political activities and advocacy, and restrictions on both; the question of expenditures for political activities and advocacy; differential restrictions on non-charitable, not-for-profit organizations and charities (public benefit organizations) (as in England and Wales); the administration of restrictions through executive, judicial or other agencies; the issue of “political purpose”; any particular or special restrictions on foundations or other philanthropic entities; the question of foreign funding and its links to issues of political activity and advocacy;

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Research problem to be addressed and the aim of the research

Restrictions on the political activities of NGOs and nonprofit organizations are increasing around the world. A major recent report from the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) states that "[i]n many countries around the world, government leaders are speaking out against the engagement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in “political activities” and thereby seeking to justify legal restrictions imposed on the NGO sector. In recent years we have witnessed restrictive laws and regulations proposed or enacted in several countries including Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela, among others."

These developments – restricting political activities of NGOs and putting them under state control – have been most prominent in Russia, but they have also occurred or have been proposed in many other countries as well. This panel will focus on identifying the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and the forms of that control, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area. The panel will focus on developments in the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

Research question

Focusing on the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, and Asia, the panel will concentrate on the research questions of identifying the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits and the forms of that control, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area. I will focus on these issues in Latin America, particularly Peru and Andean Region.

Theories and concepts that inform the research

Theories and concepts that inform this work include international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), as well as theories and concepts underlying the nonprofit sector. These will inform discussion on the panel.

Research methodology and design

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**Key theoretical and/or empirical findings**

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Research problem to be addressed and the aim of the research

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Research question

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Theories and concepts that inform the research

Theories and concepts that inform this work include international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), as well as theories and concepts underlying the nonprofit sector. These will inform discussion on the panel.

Research methodology and design
Each panelist, including me, will focus on presenting information on the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits and the forms of that control in the region where they work, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area. I will provide a short paper on these issues.

**Key theoretical and/or empirical findings**

The key theoretical and empirical findings from this panel will likely focus on the forms of regulation of NGOs and the nonprofit sector, including the distinction between civil and common law countries; the role played by various forms of control and restriction of political activities, including statutory restrictions, tax-based restrictions; organizational registration; permitted activities; different forms of restrictions for such more narrowly defined groups as registered charities; the relationship between political activities and advocacy, and restrictions on both; the question of expenditures for political activities and advocacy; differential restrictions on non-charitable, not-for-profit organizations and charities (public benefit organizations) (as in England and Wales); the administration of restrictions through executive, judicial or other agencies; the issue of “political purpose”; any particular or special restrictions on foundations or other philanthropic entities; the question of foreign funding and its links to issues of political activity and advocacy;

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**Working Title:** The Political Activities of NGOs and Nonprofit Organizations in Egypt and the Middle East

**Research problem to be addressed and the aim of the research**

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**Research question**

Focusing on the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, and Asia, the panel will concentrate on the research questions of identifying the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits and the forms of that control, comparing those across regional and national contexts, and drawing conclusions both on the forms of political activity restrictions, ways of resisting them and best practices in this area. I will focus on Egypt and the Middle East.

**Theories and concepts that inform the research**

Theories and concepts that inform this work include international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), as well as theories and concepts underlying the nonprofit sector. These will inform discussion on the panel.

**Research methodology and design**

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**Key theoretical and/or empirical findings**

The key theoretical and empirical findings from this panel will likely focus on the forms of regulation of NGOs and the nonprofit sector, including the distinction between civil and common law countries; the role played by various forms of control and restriction of political activities, including statutory restrictions, tax-based restrictions; organizational registration; permitted activities; different forms of restrictions for such more narrowly defined groups as registered charities; the relationship between political activities and advocacy, and restrictions on both; the question of expenditures for political activities and advocacy; differential restrictions on non-charitable, not-for-profit organizations and charities (public benefit organizations) (as in England and Wales); the administration of restrictions through executive, judicial or other agencies; the issue of "political purpose"; any particular or special restrictions on foundations or other philanthropic entities; the question of foreign funding and its links to issues of political activity and advocacy;

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Restrictions on the political activities of NGOs and nonprofit organizations are increasing around the world. A major recent report from the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) states that “[i]n many countries around the world, government leaders are speaking out against the engagement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in “political activities” and thereby seeking to justify legal restrictions imposed on the NGO sector. In recent years we have witnessed restrictive laws and regulations proposed or enacted in several countries including Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela, among others.”

In Asia, restrictions on political activities of NGOs and other kinds of nonprofits go back a long time – in some cases to colonial days, in some of the countries where there was colonization and that experience played a role in shaping nonprofit law. My contribution to the panel will focus on the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and the forms of that control in Vietnam, China, and India. These are very different contexts – two emerging from a colonial background and one not; two in transition from socialist forms of law governing the associational sector, and one not; and in some cases with varying concerns about different forms of political and advocacy activities by NGOs and other kinds of nonprofits.

Research question

What are the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits in Vietnam, China and India, why are such restrictions in place, how are they maintained, and what steps are underway to reform, ameliorate or resist such limitations on political and advocacy activity?

Theories and concepts that inform the research

Theories and concepts that inform this work include international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), as well as theories and concepts underlying the nonprofit sector, and the work of both academic authors and international organizations such as ICNL on the political and advocacy activities of NGOs and other nonprofit organizations. These will inform discussion on the panel.

Research methodology and design

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My contribution will provide information on the primary areas of restriction of political activity of NGOs and nonprofits and the forms of that control in Vietnam, China, and India; the rationales for those controls; how are they maintained, and what steps are underway to reform, ameliorate or resist such limitations on political and advocacy activity. I will draw primarily on the law and public policy applied to the sector, relying on documentary research, earlier field research, extensive contact with specialists in each country, and discussions in the press and other fora.

**Key theoretical and/or empirical findings**

My findings will focus on the forms of regulation of NGOs and the nonprofit sector in each of the three countries I will discuss (Vietnam, China, and India), including the distinction between civil and common law countries; the role played by various forms of control and restriction of political activities, including statutory restrictions, tax-based restrictions; organizational registration; permitted activities; different forms of restrictions for such more narrowly defined groups as registered charities; the relationship between political activities and advocacy, and restrictions on both; the question of expenditures for political activities and advocacy; differential restrictions on non-charitable, not-for-profit organizations and charities (public benefit organizations); the administration of restrictions through executive, judicial or other agencies; the issue of “political purpose”; any particular or special restrictions on foundations or other philanthropic entities; and the question of foreign funding and its links to issues of political activity and advocacy.

I will organize my discussion around key themes, which include: The forms of NGO and nonprofit activity; definitions of political activities and lobbying activities; issues of legislative and regulatory reform (including advocating with government, the legislative branch, and other groups); awareness raising activities; non-partisan election monitoring; partisan political activities; and foreign funding.