Exploring civil society in hybrid regimes: Theoretical challenges, methodological pitfalls, and empirical evidence

The last several decades have been a period of deep social and political changes all around the world. The collapse of many authoritarian regimes in the course of the so-called third wave of democratization since the 1970s was supported by a strong belief in the worldwide proliferation of democracy. However, the current state of affairs in many of those former third wave countries leads to the observation that democratization processes do not necessarily succeed, but often end up in so called “hybrid” regimes – characterized by the existence of formally democratic institutions such as elections, parliaments and courts but with significant deficits regarding civil liberties, political rights and the rule of law.

In hybrid regimes, civil society – another cornerstone of democracy – is often authorized to organize and act. Its autonomy from the state and potential leeway for action in both social and political spheres is, however, regularly limited. Hybrid regimes – that have proliferated in almost every world region – recently became a major object of study in democratization research and research on authoritarian regimes. Nonetheless, the role of civil society in this regime type, and the nexus between civil society and the often authoritarian state have surprisingly received very little scholarly attention so far. Indeed, despite the impressive body of literature on civil societies in North America and Western Europe, patterns of civic agency and collective action in other socio-political settings are certainly understudied.

In terms of theorizing about civil society in hybrid regimes, some authors argue that the very concept of civil society as a space between the family, the market and the state is not easily transferable to non-democratic settings. If we accept this claim, it represents a fundamental methodological challenge to scholars analyzing civil society in hybrid regimes.

Taking these theoretical, methodological and empirical research gaps as a starting point, this panel aims to discuss the challenges, roles, contributions and ambiguities of civil society in hybrid political systems. With this innovative approach, it addresses the ISTR Conference’s theme area “emergent areas of theorizing and practice”. Papers will focus on theoretical-methodological aspects and/or provide empirical evidence from different hybrid regimes (in the form of single or comparative case studies). Moreover, each paper focuses on a different expression of civil society – from civil society organizations (CSOs) in general, over social movements, to NGOs as political entrepreneurs. They address the following key issues:

- Regime hybridity as a challenge: Which context-specific challenges do civil society organizations (CSOs) face in hybrid regimes and how does regime-hybridity affect the CSO-sector as a whole?
- Institutions as arenas: How do institutional constraints in competitive authoritarian regimes impact on the strategy formation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs)? How do institutions influence government-NGO relations?
- Discursive opportunities as methodological contribution: (How) can civil society in different regime types be compared? To what extent can theories of social movements enrich the comparative toolbox?

Altogether, the panel contributions provide up-to-date empirical insights into, and innovative theoretical reflections upon civil society in a so far understudied research field. The panel will contribute to a critical investigation of the concept of civil society and promote its application to different political settings – beyond the traditional focus on Western democracies as object of study for civil society arrangements and power structures.

Reforming the criminal justice system in authoritarian regimes: How do NGOs utilise enforcement gaps?

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Common wisdom in research on authoritarian regimes suggests that institutions, if well designed, work as effective regime stabilisers by containing challengers. This view on institutions as straightjackets has implications for theorising on the role of NGOs: they are regularly denied meaningful agency, or are expected to make a difference only at critical junctures, i.e. in moments where the regime itself is at stake. Drawing on a theory of incremental institutional change, this paper proposes to view institutions not as straightjackets but as potential catalysts for contestation over rule enforcement. It analyses the sources that make NGOs in the field of criminal justice in post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia oppose rule enforcement, and explores how these NGOs operate within enforcement gaps. The article finds that NGOs detect different deficiencies that make them oppose the implementation of probation. Active opposition, it turns out, takes two main forms: mobilisation against enforcement gaps, and participation to correct these. The article reveals that variation in terms of strategies is rather explained by organisational features than by government responses. It also shows that NGOs fail to address one (if not the most) powerful catalyst of enforcement gaps: informal constraints.

Between “militancy and survival”: The challenges of civil society organizations in hybrid regimes. The case of Nicaragua.

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Since its revival in the 1980s the concept of civil society has made its way as an unchallenged model for the strengthening of democracy, justice and civic participation. It finds its key expression in the wide spectrum of civil society organizations (CSOs) – such as associations, unions, clubs or NGOs. Whatever their form, they can undertake multiple tasks from agenda setting to social service provision and base their work on self-organization and local civic engagement. Altogether, researchers concerned with the study of democracy and democratization keep emphasizing the importance of CSOs for the consolidation as well as for the stability and depth of democracy (see Anheier et al 2000, Cohen / Arato 1994, Diamond 1994, Putnam 1993, Polack 2003).

However, less attention has been paid to CSOs in nondemocratic and specifically so-called hybrid regimes which have emerged in several states in the course of the “third wave” (Huntington 1991) of democratization (see Diamond 2002, Morlino 2009, Wigell 2008). Despite former predictions on “The End of History” and a global proliferation of democracy (see Fukuyama 1992) developments in the past two decades have belied many hopes for those countries’ quick and automatic democratic consolidation. Although their diversity has led to “Babel in Democratization Studies” (Armony / Schamis 2005), many of these states share some fundamental features: a lack of former democratic experience, socioeconomic problems and the coexistence of formal democratic structures with significant deficits regarding political liberty, civic rights or the rule of law (Croissant 2002: 32). Stuck in a hybrid state between an authoritarian past and democratic consolidation, this proliferating type of regime might challenge civil society organizations far more than expected.

The paper sets out to analyze the specific challenges CSOs may face in such hybrid democratic contexts. In order to do so it draws on an empirical case study of CSOs and regime-hybridity in Nicaragua – a country which despite the glorious start of democratization with the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 and the quick introduction of formal democratic structures has not managed to overcome all authoritarian legacies so far.

The study is based on 32 semi-structured interviews conducted in Managua in summer 2013 with experts on civil society – including scholars, journalists and politicians as well as representatives of CSOs.

The results indicate that CSOs in Nicaragua are exposed to various domestic as well as international pressures related to the hybrid political context. First, they are faced with a poorly developed democratic culture not least expressed in the widespread persistence of traditional “caudillismo” – referring to dominant, nondemocratic and male leadership. Second, there is a
strong financial dependence on international cooperation leading to substantial problems reinforced with the current financial withdrawal of many foreign donors. Third, CSO are faced with an omnipotent governing party which has tried to take control of more and more arenas of society – permanently threatening CSOs’ scope of action (e.g. through repression, co-optation and construction of competitive party-loyal organizations).

Altogether, the paper illustrates the variety of regime-immanent challenges which CSOs face in the hybrid political context in Nicaragua. Besides, the findings provide a first insight into how the hybrid political context has shaped the Nicaraguan CSO sector as a whole – with many organizations finding themselves “between militancy and survival”.

Comparing social movements in democratic and hybrid regimes: the methodological contribution of discursive opportunities

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Even though social movements have become an established research field long time ago, there are still certain analytical and methodological challenges related to the concept of social movements as well as gaps in empirical studies. This paper aims to cover both types of challenges elaborating on the role of discourse in discursive opportunities, and to suggest how this theoretical framework can bridge knowledge of social movements in democratic and hybrid political regimes.

Snow et al noticed that the grievances interpretation is not sufficiently studied in previous research of social movements (1986). The new approach to social movements deriving from social constructivism developed by Snow et al has sparked a pronounced proliferation of studies dealing with collective action frames and conceptualising framing processes as a central research dimension alongside resource mobilization and political opportunities (Snow et al 1986; Gamson 1992; Tarrow 1992). However, the framing literature does not provide a coherent picture on processes that social movements are undergoing, mainly because it neglects the socio cultural context in which social movements are embedded, and ignores the meaning contestations between movement antagonists and protagonists. The analysis is focused solely on the movements. In other words, the interactive nature of the meaning production remains in the dark. Shifting the analytical focus from ‘frame’ to ‘discourse’ has been a major advance developed by constructivist approaches to social movements. Recently, researchers have underlined the discursive nature of social movement processes, introducing the idea of “discursive opportunities”, (Koopmans & Olzak 2004) and “discursive fields” (Snow 2007). Discursive opportunities (a concept developed from that of political opportunities) emphasize that opportunities are not given to the movements, but are constructed in certain discursive environments. The notion of discourse is of special interest for comparative studies as it allows contrasting contestation structures between discourses of movement proponents and opponents in different contexts.

Appearing first in West European and North American literature the concept of social movements has been paid attention in the scholarship of hybrid and authoritarian regimes as well. Nonetheless, the studies of social movements tend to elaborate either on democratic or undemocratic political contexts of social movements. The concept of political opportunities, the one dealing with political context in social movement studies, is usually brought forth to explain the difference between distinct democratic political systems (Kitshelt 1986). Indeed there are little comparative studies done that are engaged into the analysis of social movements in various types of political regimes.

This paper addresses these theoretical and empirical gaps by, first, introducing the notion of discourse in social movement studies, and, second, examining the work of this theoretical framework on the example of discourses of environmental movements in two countries with different political regimes – Sweden and Russia. While focusing on symbolic orders constructed by social movement organizations the study attempts to avoid the evident discussion of the distinct political opportunities available but to examine the differences and similarities occurring between the movements, in particular through examining discursive opportunities. It is based on
interviews conducted with social movement organizations, government representatives and state corporations but also on the extensive analysis of various kinds of materials produced both by movement protagonists and antagonists. The preliminary findings suggest that there are less differences in discursive opportunities for environmental movements than it would be anticipated in two countries with different political regimes and political opportunities. The concept of discursive opportunities thus opens the possibilities to conduct comparative studies of social movements in democratic and hybrid political regimes. This theoretical development as well as empirical evidences found in the case studies is of interest for the scholars of social movements.