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Challenges and Limits of CSOs in *Hybrid* Regimes: The Case of Nicaragua

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Abstract

Since the revival of the concept of civil society in the 1970s and 1980s, researchers concerned with the study of democracy and democratization have emphasized its importance for the consolidation and stability of democratic regimes. However, there is still a lack of research on civil society organizations (CSOs) in autocratic, particularly “hybrid” regimes, which are characterized by the coexistence of formal democratic structures and autocratic practices. In an attempt to fill the existing research gap at the intersection of civil society research and democratization studies, the paper sets out to explore the situation and roles of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua. What kinds of challenges in particular do Nicaraguan CSOs face in the present regime context? And more specifically, how do these challenges affect the manner in which such agents act as cultivators of change and democratization? The findings are based on a qualitative case study which draws on interviews with civil society experts and CSO leaders in Nicaragua.

Keywords

Hybrid regimes, democratization, challenges for CSOs, Nicaragua

Introduction

The concept of civil society has undergone a transboundary renaissance since the 1970s, making its way as a buzzword 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 international NGOs. CSOs, in all forms, carry out multiple tasks, from agenda setting to social service provision; their work is based on the promotion of self-organization and local civic engagement. It is generally agreed upon by scholars concerned with the study of democracy and democratization that CSOs are important for the consolidation, stability and depth of democracy (see Cohen / Arato 1994, Diamond 1994, Putnam 1993).

Despite the increase of attention that CSOs have been receiving, their role in autocratic regimes, particularly hybrid regimes, which emerged in several states in the course of the “third wave” (Huntington 1991) of democratization, is still unclear. Though scholars predicted a global proliferation of democracy (Fukuyama 1992), developments in the past two decades have belied many hopes for a quick and automatic democratic consolidation in such regimes. Many of these states share some fundamental features: a lack of former democratic experience, socioeconomic problems and the coexistence of formal democratic structures and significant deficits regarding political liberty, civic rights and 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.

In an attempt to narrow the existing research gap, this paper investigates the intersection of civil society research and research on hybrid regimes (democratization studies) by drawing on an empirical case study of CSOs and regime-hybridity in Nicaragua. The research question is twofold: What kinds of challenges in particular do Nicaraguan CSOs face in the context of the present regime? And, subsequently, how do these challenges impact the work quality of their agents, who seek to bring about change and democratization?

The results not only demonstrate the difficulties a hybrid regime context poses for the work and influence of CSOs but indicate the constraints it places on the sector’s general ability to bring about democratic change.

Research design

With view to the relatively unexplored terrain of CSOs in hybrid regimes, a qualitative research design was chosen allowing for in-depth insights into the selected case of Nicaragua. Despite its historical and cultural peculiarities, Nicaragua can serve as an exemplary case for the challenges and limits imposed by hybrid regimes on CSOs. The country has belonged to a region notorious for its hybrid political structures since the institutionalization of democracy and has, at least numerically speaking, a vibrant civil society sector.

The findings in this paper are based on semi-structured expert interviews that were conducted with Nicaraguan civil society experts in the summer of 2013. The term “expert” is used broadly, following Gläser/Laudel’s suggestion (Gläser/Laudel 2010: 13): An expert should not be categorically bound to a certain vocational status or degree of scientific knowledge;

rather, his or her expertise is based on their knowledge as a participant impacted by the situation at hand. Hence, the interviewees included scholars, journalists and donors as well as CSO leaders themselves – to retain a broader perspective on the issue.

A literature review of recent studies on Nicaraguan civil society was carried out to collect additional information.

Preliminary considerations: regime-hybridity, CSOs and democracy

With its particular interest in the challenges, features and roles of CSOs in the hybrid regime of Nicaragua, this paper draws on approaches from the realms of civil society research and democratization studies. In the following I will substantiate my research interest by sketching the most relevant assumptions and research desiderata from both fields.

Hybrid regimes

The generic term “hybrid” regime emerged in the field of democratization studies in the 1990s, when developments in many former third wave states belied hopes for their quick and automatic democratic consolidation. These countries started the democratization process in the 1970s and 1980s, beginning in Southern Europe, spreading over to Latin American and South East Asian countries and culminating in Eastern Europe and the fall of the iron curtain in 1989 (Merkel 2010: 17). Decades later, these countries still appeared to be stuck in the transition to democracy, somewhere between their authoritarian past and an incomplete democratic consolidation, in a grey zone between autocracy and consolidated democracy (Croissant 2002: 15ff). As a result, a variety of terms and conceptualizations emerged, from “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 1997) or “pseudo-democracy” (Diamond 2002) to “delegative democracy” (O’Donnell 1994) or “defective democracy” (Merkel 2003). And later, during the “democratic rollback” (Diamond 2008), the focus even turned back on authoritarian regimes, resulting in the coining of new terms such as “competitive” (Levitsky / Way 2010, Howard / Roessler 2006), “electoral” (Schedler 2006) or “semi-authoritarianism” (Ottaway 2003) and “liberalized autocracy” (Brumberg 2002).

Though these concepts assess and measure democratic defects differently, their common denominator seems to be the mixture of formal democratic structures with authoritarian legacies. Besides, the cases under study can be characterized by their surprising persistence and durability (Collier / Levitsky 1997) which inspired researchers to abandon traditional classifications and denote them as independent “hybrid” regimes. Literature on regime-hybridity, which typically considers how it can be measured or characterized, began to appear in the 1990s and 2000s (Alexander 2008, Bogaards 2009, Diamond 2002, Karl 1995, Mcmann 2006, Morlino 2009, Parajulee 2010, Wigell 2008). Such approaches are, however, dominantly quantitative, applying democracy indices to classify regimes worldwide. Less attention has been paid to in-depth approaches that might increase our understanding of how stability and persistence are achieved or focusing on the possible actors of change – such as civil society.

Hybrid regimes can be characterized, on the one hand, as having a formal institutionalization of democracy in which a constitution has been adopted, democratic institutions such as

parties and courts have been founded and elections are being held. On the other hand, hybrid regimes are also characterized by deficits regarding political and civic liberties or the rule of law (Croissant 2002). Hybrid regimes are found all over the world, in countries with diverse cultural backgrounds, histories and problems. Despite this diversity, the obstacles to democracy are common. First, such regimes lack previous democratic experience and, thus, a cultural background of democratic values. Second, such regimes typically experience severe economic difficulties due to historical debts, recent integration into a global market that is dominated by established countries and international institutions or the typical dependency on external aid. Third, hybrid regimes can be characterized by their democratic deficits in the political sphere, e.g., a weak balance of power, an executive exceeding his authority or the restriction of public space.

Civil society and (non-)democracy

Since its revival in the 1980s – often linked to the Polish solidarity movement and a growing state welfare criticism in established democracies (Lorentzen 2011: 27) – the idea of civil society has gained a lot of attention from scholars as well as the public. The concept of civil society is comprised of a wide spectrum of actors including individual activists and social movements. The particular focus in this paper is on civil society organizations (CSOs), which refer to all kinds of associations, foundations, self-help groups and internationally working NGOs.

Taken together, such organizations create a sphere between the state, the economy and the family and are marked by self-organization, pluralism, non-violent acting, compromise and interest in the common good (Kocka 2004: 69f). In this way, CSOs contribute to the anchorage and stability of democratic rule, as already exemplified by De Tocqueville in his studies on American democracy in the 19th century (De Tocqueville 1985). CSOs perform multiple democratic participatory functions, from the articulation and pooling of interests to agenda setting and state control, and serve as schools of democracy. Besides, their work as social service providers, on the reincorporation of citizens into society and on the creation of bonding forces or loyalty ties at the micro level gives them an integrating function (Pollack 2003). Correspondingly, they deepen the population's attachment to the state and acceptance of its activities, if not the democratic political system as a whole.

Altogether, the concept of civil society in its current understanding and common usage is inevitably linked to the idea of liberal democracy (Zinecker 2011: 6). Moreover, the relation between civil society and democracy is mutual; not only do our Western liberal democracies benefit from the organizational infrastructure based on self-organization and local civic engagement, but CSOs also depend on the liberties and opportunities associated with a consolidated democratic context (Edwards/Foley 1996). For a CSO to work successfully, it requires freedom of association, press and opinion as well as functioning democratic institutions and an indisputable superiority of the rule of law.

The abundant literature on civil society and democracy stands in opposition to the less explored terrain of CSOs in nondemocratic contexts. Scholars have long emphasized the need to reassess the theoretical concept of civil society, to free it from its Western bias and to make it applicable to political contexts other than democracy (Zinecker 2011). Even more, the

existence of CSOs has been documented in nearly all kinds of political regimes, confirmed by the development of international Third-Sector Research, which tries to open up the voluntary sectors in all parts of the world. However, approaches to the ideas of civil society and non-democracy lack a common conceptual ground, which would facilitate generalizations and meta-analyses.

The most common approach is the study of civil society as a sphere of resistance, intellectual debate and democratizing force (for an overview see Wnuk-Lipinski 2007). Others are more critical, pointing to the dangers of a depoliticized associational sector, which is easily undercut by autocratic rulers (Berman 1997, Koshar 1987). They address the dangers of mobilization and protest for the stability and performance of young democracies (Bernhard / Karacok 2007, Tusalem 2007, Diamond 1994) or analyze the questionable role of (international) NGOs and their legitimacy as powerful actors within post-authoritarian societies (Mercer 2001, Ishkanian 2008). However, it is only quite recently that scholars have started to see civil society's complex of problems in diverse autocratic settings as a central theme and contentious issue (Cavatorta 2013, 2010, Kaldor / Kostovicova 2008, Zinecker 2011, Lauth 1999). These innovative approaches are distinguished by their broad perspectives which incorporate civil society's potential for democratization and societal modernization as well as assess the potential risks of civil society activism under autocratic rule (e.g., legitimacy problems, reactionary tendencies and loss of autonomy).

Despite empirical evidence, there is still a lack of research concerning conceptual and systematic approaches to the idea of civil society and non-democracy. And the meaning of political context for civil society in general is also unclear. This paper tries to narrow this research gap by focusing on CSOs and their specific challenges within hybrid regimes.

Let's have a look at the Nicaraguan case and the challenges and limitations CSOs experience there due to the country's hybrid regime structures.

Introduction to the case

In the following two sections, a brief overview of the evolution and status quo of regime-hybridity and the CSO sector in Nicaragua is provided.

Regime-hybridity in Nicaragua

The development of democracy in Nicaragua took a long time, and its setbacks and disruptions have been closely linked to the country's history, which is marked by foreign occupation and the intervention of external powers. In general, the evolution of Nicaraguan democracy can be divided into three stages: the fight for liberalization and independence during autocratic rule; the first introduction of democratic structures in the course of the Sandinista Revolution (1979-90) and the ongoing development of hybrid democratic structures since 1990.

After the end of the Spanish occupation in 1821, new sources of conflict evolved within Nicaraguan society – the emerging power struggle between liberals and conservatives, the rise of a powerful café-oligarchy and the growing influence of the US that culminated in several US interventions throughout the 19th and 20th century (Schobel / Elsemann 2008: 415f). In

the 1920s, Augusto César Sandino – a later source of inspiration and eponym for the Sandinista Revolution – became known for his fight against American imperialism and his commitment to freedom and a just social order. Nonetheless, this first glimpse of liberty and hope was wiped out by his assassination (Schobel / Elsemann 2008: 417), and the 40 year dictatorship that followed it, in which the ruling Somoza-clan sought their own personal enrichment, was strongly repressive and large numbers of the population became impoverished (Reiber 2009: 272).

In the 1970s several developments led to a gradual debilitation of the regime in terms of economic strength as well as prestige and its eventual demise by the Sandinista Revolution. By the end of the decade the “Sandinistas” had taken over the leadership of various oppositional forces, and after a strong military offensive in July 1979, Somoza fled the country (Reiber 2009: 273f).

The Sandinista Revolution of 1979 can be seen as a milestone in Nicaraguan history and marked a moment full of hope and euphoria. Symbolizing the peoples’ power to free themselves from a 40 year dictatorship and their successful struggle for self-determination and self-organization, it exerted influence far beyond the borders of the country. The following period of Sandinista rule was marked by the introduction of formal democratic structures, such as the establishment of elections in 1984, the adoption of the constitution in 1987 and the promotion of political participation and organization of interests (Reiber 2009: 282). Nevertheless, the Sandinistas had their own understanding of democracy and participation – not completely compatible with liberal democracy (Merkel 2010: 219) – and many of their achievements, such as education and land reform or the successful literacy campaign, were soon challenged or overshadowed by the emerging crises. The US government under Ronald Reagan feared a “cubanisation” of its backyard Nicaraguan neighbors and next to stopping all bilateral support started building up and financing the “Contras” (counterrevolutionaries) who drew the country into civil war (Schobel / Elsemann 2008: 418). By 1987 the Nicaraguan economy was down, inflation high and the population was tired of war, and the two opposing camps had reached a kind of stalemate in which neither of them seemed to be victorious (Reiber 2009: 276ff). A peace agreement stipulating elections in 1990 was eventually settled.

The elections gave rise to a neoliberal era in which the institutionalization of democracy, which was initially introduced during the Sandinista Revolution, was carried forward by means of constitutional reforms, the formation of political parties and (more or less) democratic elections. Nonetheless, increasing social inequality, corruption, quarrels among the liberal-conservative coalition and pacts among the political elite contributed to the discontent of the population.

In the 2006 elections Daniel Ortega, former president during the revolution and current leader of the Sandinista party FSLN, took advantage of the disunity of the political right, the general discontent and mistrust among the population and changes in the electoral law. His presidency (reconfirmed by his reelection in 2011) is marked by ambiguous developments – positive innovations and improvements in regard to social justice and equality are accompanied by setbacks concerning democratic governance and the rule of law (Schnipkoweit/Schützhofer 2008: 6) – which seem to have further divided Nicaraguan society.

All in all, there are three main symptoms, which are also apparent in other hybrid regimes, that have impacted the country's democratic development: it had almost no democratic experience until 1979; the newly developed democratic system then failed to reduce the high level of socioeconomic inequality and poverty; although formal institutionalization was implemented rather quickly, time seems to have strengthened the hybrid democratic structures more than the democratic consolidation.

On the whole, regime-hybridity in Nicaragua can best be explained by the discrepancy between constitution and political reality (Serra Vázquez 2007). Though Nicaraguan governments since 1990 have been democratically elected, they were later accused of exceeding their powers, linking posts and advantages to party membership and repressing oppositional forces. The current President Ortega is especially well-known for having “walked a tightrope between democracy and autocracy, tolerating a democratic system and its institutions while seeking to acquire as much power as possible” (Anderson 2009: 157).

Evolution of civil society

The formation of civil society in Nicaragua can be traced all the way back to indigenous communities in the 19th century and the development of the first labor unions or mutual savings and assistance organizations at the beginning of the 20th century can be seen as a further step in this process (Serra Vázquez 2011: 24). But because Nicaragua was controlled over 40 years in a dictatorship, where all kinds of autonomous civic organizations were either suppressed or eradicated, the Sandinista Revolution must be counted as the birth of modern civil society in Nicaragua. In 1979 civil society was a diverse oppositional movement that fought against the dictator and advocated the development of organizational structures.

In fact, the following “revolutionary decade of the 1980s was characterized by the dominance of the Sandinista mass organizations” (Borchgrevink 2006: 7), from workers' confederations and women's organizations to the Sandinista union of health workers, all of which were highly active and integrated large parts of the population (Borchgrevink 2006: 7). These organizations were marked by their vertical management styles and close ties to the Sandinista party, which functioned as the primary source of legitimation and funding. When the Sandinista Government was suddenly voted out in 1990, a challenge was posed to all CSOs and led to a reformation of the civil society sector. While the classic Sandinista mass organizations lost influence, there was a boom of new CSOs. On the one hand, there was a boom because CSOs found new sources of funding from external donors, and because of the large number of former government employees, there were no difficulties staffing personnel. On the other, CSOs became necessary as neoliberal policies reduced public service provisions, thus leading to the emergence of organizations in fields such as health and education (Borchgrevink 2006: 8). This explosion of CSOs set the foundation for the present civil society sector in Nicaragua, which is strongly influenced by foreign donors and the dynamics of NGO'ization and is divided by the government in power.

Finally, the electoral victory of President Ortega in 2006 seems to have been another important juncture for Nicaraguan CSOs. Persisting regime-hybridity has exposed the weaknesses and dependencies within the civil society sector, which will be brought out in the following section in an analysis of challenges posed to Nicaraguan CSOs.

Challenges for CSOs in Nicaragua

The following section summarizes the findings on the specific challenges faced by Nicaraguan CSOs concerning their qualities to act as agents of change and democratization. Tying in with the theoretical considerations at the beginning of this article, the challenges can be classified as political, economic or cultural (i.e., the areas in which regime-hybridity is manifest).

Political challenges

The first challenge for CSOs lies in the Nicaraguan government's ambivalent if not hostile attitude towards the very concept of civil society. In practice the President and his followers have formed a habit of distinguishing between two different notions of civic participation and organization. Civil society is either spoken of negatively, as being exploited by foreign donors and associated mainly with the organizational form of NGOs, or positively, according to their own conception of participation and societal organization via so-called "social organizations". Accordingly one expert summarized the government's conception of CSOs as follows:

(...) For the FSLN the problem with CSOs is that they are disputing three important things to the government: the relations with the population, they dispute political capital. They dispute resources, those from development cooperation, and they dispute social hegemony, the power to control society. These people are not worthy of the party, they do not act as transmission belts, that's why they are such a problem, a big problem. (int. 7)¹

The current government obviously dismisses the idea of a critical civil society sector that is autonomous from the state and meant to influence and shape the country; instead, it has come to see CSOs as a threat to its power. Although it contributed massively to the construction of civil society in the 1980s, the Sandinista party now fears critical voices and perceives particularly NGOs as oppositional forces that are financed by foreign powers and thus willing to undermine the government (int. 16, 3). This disapproval of NGOs is expressed in the view of a government consultant and former head of a loyal CSO, who classified them as a "means of the first world to subordinate the third world and disempower the state" (int. 20). This view is common among government officials, and the CSOs that are loyal to the government often denounce NGOs, claiming they are imperialist expressions and a means for foreign powers to influence national Nicaraguan politics. They dismiss NGOs as groups of self-important actors who merely squander money and try to get in the way of the government's agenda.

In contrast, the government has its own idea of civil society in the form of social organizations that are more community-based. To their minds, civil society is an 'organized society' that is loyal and works together with the government to improve the country. Compared to NGOs, their version of civil society is presented as close to the population, is said to mediate between government and its citizens and constructively contributes to the governing process (int. 22).

¹ All interviews were done in Spanish (30) or German (2) - and the quotations cited in this paper were translated into English by the author.

These opposed views of the roles and functions of civil society have strongly polarized the civil society sector and deepened the rift between the “opposition” and the “loyals”. In its strategic manipulation of CSOs, the government applies the following three strategies to corroborate its own idiosyncratic notion of them.

The first strategy is the **persecution and repression** of disagreeable CSOs, which ranges from direct attacks and administrative harassment to simple ignorance and exclusion. Shortly after his election, current President Ortega had already emphasized his disapproval of critical CSOs by launching strategic, scattered actions against the most salient actors within different working fields – including the international NGO Oxfam, the Autonomous Women’s Movement (MAM), and the famous Nicaraguan organization CINCO (Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación) (int. 7). The CSOs’ most prominent figures were facing accusations of money laundry, which were being supported by a media-based smear campaign (int. 4). Since then attention has been turned to the women’s movement, which, with its belligerent fight for democracy and gender equality, has become a specific target of repression and hate (int. 7). One CSO leader summarized the present challenges that are faced by CSOs working in controversial fields or trying to gain political influence:

Or if a CSO tries to interfere politically, in topics that run counter to the government, it’s a sin. Now, any organization that disagrees or depicts malpractices of the government ... this is the point to get persecuted if not annulated as a CSO. And they can even ... there have been threats of imprisonment at some point. Apparently lobbying against the government – it’s a sin. (int. 1)

Today, when CSOs are asked about their relation with the present government, they report that the actions are less severe but still intimidating, such as leaving daunting messages or computer theft; in any case, such actions are always directed to those who dare to criticize or touch on sensitive issues:

So they stole a computer, but we continued working. They stole six in a year, we think this is intimidating. It’s to stop us from doing certain things, stop writing about topics that they don’t want us to write about. They don’t want someone to write about themselves, for example matters of the military or if we were interfering in this issue of the Canal – they would have started exerting pressure on us already. (int. 4)

By and large, current governmental action towards disagreeable CSOs seems to be limited to administrative harassment. This may affect the CSO itself in the form of arbitrary requirements, monetary fines, obstruction and deferment (e.g., when it comes to the authorization of a legal personality) or its representatives, who report having difficulties when trying to open bank accounts or receive their passports. As one interviewee formulated, in the end the government has the power to close down or at least constrain every organization:

They will search for whatever excuse. They start with a “radiograph” of your organization, to find whatever weak point there is and to tell you that this is wrong. And they paint a bad picture of you in front of the others, saying that you

are attacking and doing something wrong ... and in the end they say that you are stealing. (int.1)

The government also uses measures of intimidation, directed towards the general population and possible members or target groups, to discourage engagement with certain CSOs. People who work at such public institutions have to fear the loss of employment, the denial of benefits or the exclusion from social programs that are run by the organizations that are loyal to the government (int. 2).

However, even the more harsh actions from the early years have been reactivated in the face of demonstrations and open protests on the streets. This became obvious in 2013 as senior citizens, who were publicly supported by many CSOs, began demonstrating for their right to pension. When the demonstrations grew, the government intervened with police operations and violent actions against the demonstrators. This was commonly perceived as a strategic measure to deter individuals and CSOs and to enforce the government party's claim to control and take to the streets (int. 9, 13).

The second major strategy to control civil society has been to **restrict and influence international donors** and development assistance, the most important funding source for many Nicaraguan CSOs.

Since its inauguration, the government has attempted to take control over foreign money flows to Nicaraguan CSOs, trying to influence the selection of recipients (via black lists), topics and working fields. Experts generally agree that the Nicaraguan government – via the allocation and refusal of visas (int. 21) or direct pressure on foreign governments – has successfully influenced international NGOs and their staff. As the interviewed representatives of international CSOs admitted, in the long run this can lead to strategic evasion, a focus on unproblematic working fields, and sometimes even questionable cooperation with government institutions and the funding of “loyal” CSOs (int. 6)

In addition to repression and the termination of foreign money flows, the Nicaraguan government uses **substitution and co-optation** to challenge CSOs. More precisely, it has fostered the development of proper, party-loyal and non-autonomous organizations and local participation structures (int. 7). These include the organization of society via so-called citizen councils (*consejos de poder ciudadano*) and family cabinets (*gabinetes de familia*), the empowering of traditionally allied unions and the promotion of counter movements and party-loyal NGOs.

At the local level, they first fostered the creation of a new participation system via the newly invented CPCs, officially presented as intermediaries between the communities and the government. Although they are officially open to everyone, these local councils are headed by FSLN officials and are mainly used to execute the government's social programs. According to critics, these local councils are mere party loyal forces that lack a proper agenda; they merely bring the local population into line while discriminating against those who are unwilling to join the governing party (int. 9, 16).

Second, the government's promotion of new party loyal organizations and counter movements is an implicit critique of CSOs. For instance, one expert talked about the

catchpenny launch of a new women's movement called "Blanca Arauz", which sank into oblivion soon after its media based launch (int. 24).

In 2008, with the women's movement, they created an association of women, named Blanca Arauz, who was Sandino's wife. And they created it as a counterweight to the women's movement, to the autonomous women's movement. And this never ... it was created only to appear in the photograph, and never worked, it doesn't have a proper form, they do not unite, don't talk with the women, it was no more than a letterhead. If you look for it today, you won't find anything. (int. 7)

Third, the government challenges CSOs by coopting and promoting traditional party loyal "social organizations", which include unions, social movements and even several NGOs (e.g., the Association of Rural Workers [ATC]; the Federation of Health Workers [FETSALUD]; the teachers' union [ANDEN]). Such social organizations struggled under past governments, but, as soon as Ortega came into power once again, they (whether forced or voluntarily) became part of the revolution. The unions in particular were able to gather together large parts of the working population but, because of their unconditional party loyalty, squandered the opportunity for potential power. Accordingly, one of their officials was confronted with a slight criticism of the government's policies in an informal meeting with members. He retorted, "We are unionists, but first and foremost we are Sandinistas".

Taken together, these politically-related challenges were interpreted by many CSO representatives as the attempt to "suffocate" the idea of an independent, self-organized civil society in Nicaragua:

So to say we cannot keep on working like this, exist like that forever. Something has to change, if it doesn't, we won't be able to exist, and that is the government's bet, I guess. Restrict spaces and resources to the point where we have to give in, stop to exist as civil society. (int. 4)

Economic challenges

The high level of poverty in Nicaragua (i.e., more than one third of the population lives below poverty line [*The World Factbook 2009*]) poses a second problem for Nicaraguan CSOs. On the one hand, economic problems hinder the population from being recruited for the purpose of CSOs and prevent the emergence of a critical mass that could fight for a change and democratic consolidation from below. On the other, the high dependency on international funding has a questionable influence on the sector's structure and agenda and is currently, in the face of many donors' withdrawals, contributing to its decline.

First of all, the daily struggle to make ends meet restricts the time and energy necessary for participating, questioning and fighting. With the present level of poverty, many people do not care about the constitution, their rights or autocratic setbacks, as they are preoccupied with the daily nutrition and survival of their families and children (int. 13). Correspondingly the interviewed experts viewed the non-existent middle class, with the time, capacity and money to care about and reclaim their rights, as an important obstacle to civic engagement and participation:

In every society there have to be middle classes, so to say people with their basic needs resolved and with a level of education, mental, intellectual formation that allows them to reclaim more than the basics, further liberties. (int. 13)

Furthermore, experts fear that people are more prone to accept autocratic tendencies and duck their head if they are benefiting from social programs and if the political elite promises improvement. Accordingly, one scholar of civil society drew from the common proverb “all politicians steal, but this one at least helps us” as he referred to how many are indifferent towards a president’s autocratic style of government as long as he presents himself credibly as a president of the poor (int. 9).

Another major economic-related challenge is the financial dependency of large parts of the CSO sector on foreign funding and international cooperation.

Nicaraguan civil society has been massively supported by international donors since its initial development of the democratization process in the 1980s/1990s. This seemingly uncontrolled, nontransparent and uncoordinated support led to the growth and temporary strength of CSOs and shaped the sector’s characteristics as well as weaknesses. Experts claim that the dominant influence of international donors has enforced processes of bureaucratization and NGOization, if not the materialization of CSOs, which alienates them from their original goals and target groups. Donors (i.e., development agencies and international NGOs) generally tend to choose their partners based on a set of formal standard selection criteria and other official requirements, including the necessity of a legal status, formal proposals and accounting systems. Many organizations therefore claim that they spend too much time on administrative tasks at the cost of their proper agenda (int. 12). Indeed many interviewees criticized international cooperation for promoting a bureaucratic civil society, which loses its militancy and devotion, if not idealism (int. 21). Though they highly appreciate the international contribution to a more plural society in Nicaragua and the development of a civil society sector in general, they claimed, at the same time, that international donors always “falsify” organizations and try to control them (int. 13).

However, international cooperation often falsifies social organizations, as it matures or tries to mature them from the outside, with money, with objectives. So donors now want gender perspectives, but next year they want the construction of latrines, and in the following year they want something else ... and as everyone depends on the funding this prevents real development. (int. 13)

According to the interviewees, donors have enforced competition within the sector, an orientation towards trendy topics and the realization of short-time projects at the expense of long-term reforms fostering fundamental social change. As a result CSOs have become focused on the perpetuation of funding and projects and may act opportunistically, causing them to lose sight of their original target groups (int. 2).

The Nicaraguan CSO sector also experienced difficulties related to the weaknesses of donors. Interestingly, although donors have criticized Nicaraguan civil society for their lack of cohesion, communication, transparency and common strategies vis-a-vis the state, donors

themselves admit that they also completely fail to act according to these principles (int. 2). After all, international cooperation suffers from Ortega's repression, too. As stated above, donors and foreign governments as well as international NGOs are getting pressured to work with specific organizations and to concentrate on less conflictive topics and working fields; it is therefore no surprise that they tend to transfer these pressures onto their partner organizations (int. 7):

Besides, development cooperation requests CSOs to present credentials, endorsement letters from local governments, from administrations, they require a certificate of acceptance of the ministry. Thus the very cooperation reinforces the government's repression mechanisms as they oblige CSOs to submit to these mechanisms. And therefore it's a civil society that is backing out and has stopped operating, working on the most conflictive issues. (int. 7)

Nicaraguan CSOs have criticized the international donor agencies and NGOs that seem to succumb to the pressure too quickly, adapting to the government's plans, refraining from certain fields and partners and insisting on the necessity of a dialogue with the government (int. 2, 21). For instance, they pointed out that international cooperation has stopped supporting the promotion of democracy and governance and that many agencies working in these fields even left the country (int. 7). They claimed that international donors always try to cooperate with the government and even risk financing autocratic government/power (int. 3). Experts and CSO representatives emphasized that all international cooperation should be guided by the principles of democracy and governance and that compliance to these principles should be a criteria for cooperation. However, they claimed that international donors in Nicaragua usually avoid interfering in political issues and have weakened their requirements to prevent quarrels with the Ortega government (int. 7, 28). Instead, international donors seemed to have adapted their style of cooperation and concentrate on rather unproblematic working fields such as health or education (int. 23).

Closely linked is the fact that international donors are always dependent on proper interests and never solely altruistic. Indeed, NGO members as well as experts claimed that many projects are more beneficial for the interests of the donors than the CSOs or the Nicaraguan population (int. 15). Although the President's harsh and generalized accusation that all disloyal CSOs are driven by imperialist powers and remote-controlled actors is questionable, there is still a grain of truth in it. As many CSOs are in fact financially dependent on foreign donor agencies or international NGOs, they have to adapt their agenda, working strategies and administration to their donors' rules, guidelines and interests.

Last but not least, the consequences of the CSOs' high degree of dependency became apparent as many donors' began to withdrawal support from Nicaragua in the last years. Important traditional donors such as nearly all Nordic European countries (Norway, Sweden, and Finland), the historic partner Spain or Germany have at least reduced their developmental assistance to Nicaragua if they have not completely stopped it or even closed their embassies. The reasons for this withdrawal can be partly attributed to political disagreement, but there has also been a shift of priorities to other world regions and a worldwide economic crisis (int. 16). The consequences for the civil society sector have been immense; the sudden lack of

funding sources has led to staffing shortages, stopping projects and in some cases the complete closing of organizations.

Nonetheless the withdrawal not only discloses the dependency on resources, but also many CSOs' control over their own agenda and overall organization. Due to lifelong dependency and support, it is difficult for CSOs to find new modes of existence and sometimes even to develop a proper agenda (int. 2):

The majority of CSOs are preoccupied with their own survival or haven't managed to strategically reorient itself in the present situation and to reconsider: "where do we come from, where is my basis, who is my constituency and how can I still get involved?"

And the reason for that is that in the past, and there we have to blame ourselves as donors as well, many organizations in the face of large amounts of money have acted opportunistically. True to the motto if there is money for the environment, I will run an environmental project, if there is money for work against child labor, I will make a project for children. Thus, many organizations have actually forgot who they are, forgot about their strengths and their basis which they represent and from which they get their support. (int. 2)

On the whole the findings highlight the challenges resulting from the widespread poverty and the sector's dependency on international cooperation. Since the overthrow of dictatorship by the Sandinista revolution promoted the emergence and development of a CSO sector in Nicaragua, international donors have influenced its orientation, agenda and working strategies. This financial and organizational dependency is now the sector's Achilles heel.

Cultural-historical challenges

Alongside political and economic challenges, the findings illustrate that the CSO sector in Nicaragua suffers from a general lack of democratic experience and anchorage of democratic values within society. Age-long oppression prevented the development of a democratic political culture within the population, a potential source of recruitment and target group, and the internal structure of CSOs themselves.

Experts saw this lack of a democratic culture and thinking in Nicaragua as an obstacle to civic engagement and participation: colonial thinking, populism, caudillism and undemocratic societal structures prevent the development of a sense of (active) citizenship and estimation of rights and liberties:

A democratic culture implies that there is an awareness of citizenship and it's an awareness of rights and duties. But the majority of Nicaraguans imagine, think about it as a kind of identity card: I was born in Nicaragua, I am Nicaraguan, long live the flag, the national tree, the national bird – but it's about rights, I have rights to reclaim vis-à-vis the government! (int. 13)

The missing anchorage of democratic values is visible as well in the traditional aspiration and worship of leaders and many Nicaraguans' aptness to follow social dynamics no matter the person behind it (int. 3). One expert compared the current mass mobilizations for Ortega

(whether voluntarily or not) with the mass mobilizations during the dictatorship of Somoza and those during the Sandinista Revolution in the 1980s and deduced that Nicaraguans seem to be prone to follow a leadership figure (int. 12).

Experts also noticed a high degree of passivity and apathy within the Nicaraguan population, which they attributed to the historical fear of war and losing more than could be won. They asserted that the Nicaraguan population lacked comprehension of the idea of participation and engagement, which has led to the accommodation and assimilation of all kinds of situations instead of protest (int. 3). All in all, the population's proneness to blindly follow a leader, combined with an aptitude for passivity and apathy, is enforced by the lack of education and the idleness of the political elite. According to one of my interviewees, a Nicaraguan government has never fostered the idea of participation and civic engagement (int. 3).

However, these cultural and historical obstacles to civic engagement and participation within the population are also observable among CSOs and their individual representatives. The interviews highlight that autocratic behavior, internal quarrels, resignation, elitism, politicization and a lack of expertise threaten to weaken the civil society sector as a whole.

Experts as well as CSO representatives perceived an internal disunity within the sector: CSOs fail to communicate, exchange information and cooperate due to leadership ambitions or competition for funding. Besides, a general politicization due to a historical division of the sector into Sandinista and non-Sandinista organizations and political aspirations of some CSOs (trying to substitute or become a political party) endanger the unity of the civil society sector and threaten the legitimacy of CSOs.

These historical cleavages have, alongside economically based competition for funding and contradictory attitudes towards the present government, caused fragmentation and polarization within the sector. Accordingly, a representative admitted that "we have to implement in our CSOs the same values that we demand from our government: no re-election, leadership, generational change, rotation of leader, etc." (int. 16). On the whole the interviews point out that the mentioned historical-cultural legacies strengthen resignation, fear and opportunism among the population as well as within the very CSOs themselves.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper I explored the specific challenges posed to civil society organizations as regards their quality as agents of democratization and consolidation in hybrid regimes. The focus was on the case of Nicaragua, a former third wave country which is still struggling with political, economic and historical drawbacks. In these contexts, CSOs – from a democratic theory point of view – could be the only hope for a future democratic consolidation and overcoming of hybrid regime structures. With their democratic-participatory functions, they qualify as crucial actors for denouncing and challenging autocratic legacies and practices, anchoring democratic thinking within society and fostering societal modernization and democratization. However, the persistence of hybrid regimes worldwide, despite the promotion and existence of CSOs, inspired my research on the underexplored challenges CSOs face in this type of regime.

For the case of Nicaragua, the findings show that the challenges faced by Nicaraguan CSOs concern the political, the economical and the cultural-historical sphere. First, CSOs have to

deal with a president who propagates an idiosyncratic conception of civil society and tries to manipulate and control the sector. For this purpose he pursues the strategies of repression, co-optation and even substitution through party-loyal actors and monitored participation structures.

Second, widespread poverty and the population’s necessity to satisfy their basic needs restrict civic engagement and participation and have also intensified the sector’s high dependency on funding from international donors. This not only involves the risk of bureaucratization, ngoization and elitism, which leads to artificial CSOs alienated from their original objectives and target population, but increases the vulnerability of the sector as a whole, as has been shown with the current withdrawal of developmental aid and international NGOs, which has left the sector high and dry in an overly conflictive situation.

Third, the missing anchorage of democratic values and a democratic political culture challenge citizen engagement and participation as well as organizations themselves, where traditional caudillismo, populism and leadership problems together with historical cleavages are causing quarrels and disunity within the sector.

Table 1: Challenges for Nicaraguan CSOs

sphere	challenges	features	consequences
political	The government’s idiosyncratic notion of civil society and participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repression of disagreeable CSOs: persecution, administrative harassment and cut of foreign money flows from external donors - Promotion of proper, government-loyal CSOs via co-optation and substitution 	<p>Growth of CSO activity in less conflictive working fields such as health and education</p> <p>Increase of service providers and government-loyal CSOs</p> <p>Weakening of autonomous, critical, self-organized groups fostering social change and democratization</p> <p>Fragmentation, polarization, disunity within the sector</p>
economic	Poverty of population and CSOs’ dependency on international donors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of a middle class with its basic needs resolved and ready to get engaged / fight for rights and liberties - NGOization, bureaucratization, materialization alienating CSOs from their objectives and target groups and reinforcing their vulnerability 	
cultural / historical	Missing anchorage of democratic political culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Passive, intimidated population prone to tolerate autocracy - Missing anchorage of democratic values within the CSO sector itself: internal quarrels, undemocratic hierarchies and lack of cooperation 	

Source: own compilation

On the whole these challenges seem to deeply influence the Nicaraguan CSO sector’s general strength and quality to act as agents of change and democratization (see table 1). Present consequences or trends include, first of all, a general shift among organizations to less conflictive working fields and topics – health, environment or education at the expense of governance and (human) rights; second, a strategic refocusing and restriction to service

provision and emergency help instead of political incidence and protest; third, a debilitation of autonomous, critical, and self-organized groups fostering social change and democratization; and last, an increasing disunity and slight fragmentation of the CSO sector due to increased competition for funding, the failure to overcome historical polarization and disaccord as regards the present regime structures.

Altogether these findings serve as an interesting point of departure for further research, enhancing the conceptualization of CSOs in hybrid or other nondemocratic regimes. After all, the insights into the Nicaraguan case reveal how the political, historical-cultural and economic contexts in hybrid regimes deeply challenge common discourse on CSOs and their ability to bring about democratic change.

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Annex: Interviews

- Int. 1 Nicaraguan CSO (environment)
- Int. 2 Foreign donor organization
- Int. 3 Nicaraguan CSO (rights)
- Int. 4 Research institute
- Int. 5 International CSO (development)
- Int. 6 International CSO (development)
- Int. 7 Research institute
- Int. 8 Nicaraguan CSO Network
- Int. 9 Scholar (university)
- Int. 10 Journalist / consultant
- Int. 11 Nicaraguan CSO (rights)
- Int. 12 Foreign donor organization
- Int. 13 Journalist /consultant
- Int. 14 CSO (women)
- Int. 15 Scholar (university)
- Int. 16 Journalist / consultant
- Int. 17 CSO (labor union)
- Int. 18 Foreign donor organization
- Int. 19 CSO (labor union)
- Int. 20 CSO (rural development)
- Int. 21 Research institute
- Int. 22 CSO (CPC)
- Int. 23 Scholar (university)
- Int. 24 Nicaraguan CSO (women)
- Int. 25 Nicaraguan CSO (Women)
- Int. 26 Nicaraguan CSO (labor union)
- Int. 27 International CSO (women)
- Int. 28 Nicaraguan CSO (health)
- Int. 29 International CSO (development)
- Int. 30 Nicaraguan CSO (rights)
- Int. 31 Nicaraguan CSO (women)
- Int. 32 Foreign donor organization