



Refocusing Civil Society's Engagement with the State in Africa

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Political independence attained mostly in the 1960s by most African countries exuded great hope for rapid progress and development for their ordinary people. But personal-cum-ethnic domination through civilian one-party and military dictatorship drove African countries into economic bankruptcy, majority of their people into deeper poverty and even death. Thus by the 1980s, it was clear that the greatest obstacle to change was corrupt and self-serving politics. The mobilization of civil society forces naturally sought to transform dictatorship into liberal democratic politics. The connection between the nature of African politics and retrogression was rightly made but the persisting harsh living conditions after over a decade of transition from dictatorship to liberal democracy casts doubts on the existing engagement of civil society with the state.

If all manner of dictatorship failed to oblige development and progress in Africa, it was logical to seek an alternative model of state organization. What was at issue even for radical African scholars such as Claude Ake was not the desirability of democracy but what kind of democracy oppressed Africans require for their liberation! They rejected not democracy but liberal democracy, which African dictators and the West were

willing to concede because of its limitations on the realization of the economic aspirations of oppressed Africans. Victims of bad governance must make a conscious effort to liberate themselves by seizing the available democratic space to their advantage. The privileged among victims in society should take up the challenge to play the role of a vanguard in their collaboration with their less fortunate folks to bring about change.

African people owe themselves the duty to be conscious of their rights, duties and obligations as part of their own effort at overturning the entrenched phenomenon of bad governance. This is where the concept of political participation is particularly relevant. As the greatest victim of bad governance, the people have a greater stake in democratic governance. The least act of political participation is the exercise of the right to vote. The more challenging act for which most Africans are not known is to exercise oversight on government by maintaining contact with it. They should begin to use all the instruments of political participation: lobbying, working inside political parties, mass propaganda, litigation, demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, non-violent civil disobedience, etc to challenge misrule.



Concretizing Civil Society Protest

Misrule has concrete outcomes. They include unemployment, pervasive poverty, child labour, maternal/child mortality, pollution through alternative energy, lack and decay of infrastructure such as good roads, public water supply, electricity, public transport system/social security, which even the mother countries of capitalism have for the benefit of the vulnerable groups. One ill shared by both the state and society is broken citizenship. In many African countries, it is one country/nationality but different citizenships. As a result, movement of people is implicitly restricted. There is no freedom to settle anywhere and enjoy all the rights and benefits of a citizen. Both the government and elements in society are rejecting the right of fellow nationals to economic rights either outright or with all manner of encumbrances. Take for example the right to purchase and develop a piece of land. The non-indigene so-called in particular, a fellow national, can be denied the right to purchase a piece of land for erecting

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a building let alone for a greater purpose in one part of the country. If they do succeed in purchasing one, all manner of tolls are exacted from them to be allowed to execute their project by elements in the local society. In other words, there are so many parallel governments, each exacting a heavy toll from fellow 'citizens.' It is equally important for the civil society to focus the oppression going on within society.

The concerns being advocated here can be summarized as fractured citizenship and governmental neglect. The civil society should begin to organize against these ills because they are obstructing of progress and development as corrupt politics. Protest against dictatorship, which translates into the quest for transition to civil rule should also be carried into the areas of concern of civil society. As a perceptive Nigerian journalist,

Solana Olumhense, has put it, such protests should be coordinated and persistent. Organized groups such as labour unions should begin to go beyond engaging the state/employer over salaries and wages. They should be organizing against misrule or poor governance and structures of relations, which divide the people and prevent them from seeing the state as the real enemy.

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ANNOUNCEMENT:

Special Issue of *Voluntas* on Civil Society in Africa

The International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) Africa Regional Network is proud to announce the publication of a special issue of *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* (Volume 23, Number 1, March 2012) on the theme: Civil Society in Africa. All the papers in the special issue were first presented at the "One Day Workshop on Civil Society in Africa" which preceded the 9th International Conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR), held at Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey, in July 2010. The workshop was made possible by generous financial support from the Dakar-based policy and advocacy think tank, TrustAfrica.

The special issue comprises six original papers. These include: "Introduction", by Ebenezer Obadare; "Measuring Civil Society: Perspectives on Afro-Centrism", by Alan Fowler; "Youth Agency, Sport and the Public Sphere in Kenya", by Priscilla Wamucii; "Democratic Governance and

Actors' Conceptualization of "Civil Society" in Africa: State-Civil Society Relations in Ghana from 1982-2000", by Christina Atibil; "Social Movements and Socio-Political Change in Africa: The Ufungamano Initiative and Kenyan Constitutional Reform Struggles (1999-2005)", by Jacob Mwachati Mati; and "Reconsidering the Case for Enhancing Accountability Via Regulation", by Ronelle Burger.

As a cohort, the six original papers codify an emergent attempt in the African civil society literature to recapture the mood of the early period when civil society scholarship about Africa was dominated by high-minded theorizing and imaginative conceptualizing. Thus, in their respective foci, they reflect, on the one hand, the ascendance of a more critical attitude toward formal associational forms and agency; and on the other, the privileging of issues, processes and debates at the heart of democratic transformation and social change throughout the African continent.

Another paper from the One Day Workshop in Istanbul, Ebenezer Obadare's "Revalorizing the Political: Towards a New Intellectual Agenda



Ebenezer Obadare

for African Civil Society Discourse" was recently published in the *Journal of Civil Society* (Volume 7, Issue 4, December 2011, pp. 427-442).

The Africa Regional Network is currently making plans to organize another workshop before the 10th International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) international conference, holding at the Università Degli Studi Di Siena, Italy, from July 10-13, 2012. The tentative theme of the proposed workshop is "Economic Spaces and Political Opportunities for African Civil Society Organizations".

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

ISTR Africa Workshop

Universita Degli Studi Di Siena • Siena, Italy

9 July 2012 (preceding the 10th international ISTR conference held from 10 -13 July)

ECONOMIC SPACES AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS: 8 APRIL, 2012

Historically, discussions of democracy and development in Africa have been conflated with parallel debates on processes of economic liberalization in the continent's differing contexts. Indeed, some have argued that political democratization and economic liberalization are two sides of the same coin. In this approach, neo-liberalism is presented as the foundation for both economic policy and democratic possibilities. The achievement of neo-liberal values calls for the creation of a balance between individual freedoms and good governance on the one hand and the creation of rapidly growing marketing economies on the other. Regrettably, African countries have faltered in terms of the latter, which has in turn affected civil liberties and widespread economic development. Some countries have experienced significant economic growth but wealth distribution has remained highly unequal in many parts of the continent.

The above developments have advanced as well as constrained civil society organizations. On the positive side, many civil society associations have utilized state weaknesses, the lack of political will to undertake crucial reforms and repression of civic action as opportunities for activism.



It is the lack of operating spaces, for instance that prompted many civil society organizations to push for legitimization of their activities that resulted in recognition and regulatory frameworks. In the best case scenarios, these frameworks not only enhance their credibility but also demand high levels of accountability. Contrastingly, civil society regulation is still marked with contradictions in some countries, while others lack regulatory frameworks.

In recent years, civil society has undergone transformations as evidenced by unprecedented forms of social uprising. These organized and spontaneous collective mobilizations have been influenced by undemocratic governments and

global economic trends that continue to affect the development of many countries. In many ways, escalating fuel costs, increased food prices and a rise in the general cost of living have served as platforms for airing multiple grievances by civil society organizations. Calls for political reforms and disposals of autocratic leaders have been largely successful in North Africa. Constitutional reforms and electoral processes have been evident in Kenya. Citizens in other countries such as Malawi, Uganda and South Africa have rallied against corruption and the rising cost of living.

Increasingly, many civil society organizations are engaging the state on issues of economic governance by advocating for people driven

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

national budgets, reduction of taxes for essential goods, domestic resource mobilization, monitoring foreign direct investments, enhancing regional and economic regional integration and devising effective ways of dealing with national debts to international financial institutions among other issues.

Notably, current collective actions have also highlighted the role played by new media. Social networking sites have enhanced citizen's journalism and have been seen as a crucial element in the success of many recent social mobilizations. Another important dimension of the social protests has been the violent nature that has characterized the collective action emerging both from the state and the protestors.

In some cases governments have responded violently to social protests as seen in the cases of Egypt, Libya and Uganda. In other contexts, civil agency has been marked with violence or uncivil dimensions. These kinds of violence raise concerns over accountability and justice, particularly, the identification of the most appropriate judicial apparatus for addressing various injustices. Such discussions have revolved around local courts versus the International Criminal Tribunal. Further, the violent dimensions of collective action also raise concerns over possibilities of exacerbating existing instability in many African countries and opening up resolved conflicts. Lastly, recent organized actions have changed the dynamics of the composition or nature of civil society organizing.



While many civil mobilizations were characterized by participation from a working class majority, more recent action has attracted a significant representation of the middle class.

As discussed above, economic and political governance are intrinsically connected. Abstracts that address these general themes are invited. Other areas that could be interrogated include:

- **Civil society and state accountability**
- **Violence, conflict and civil disobedience**
- **Accountable civil society**
- **Economic effects of foreign aid on civil society organizations**
- **Impact of economic and political developments on collective mobilization strategies**
- **Impact of global economic trends on remittances**
- **Social action and the composition, identity or nature of civil society e.g. increased middle class participation**
- **Role of media and social networks in collective action**
- **People driven economic governance reforms**
- **Donor aid and its influence of various forms of civil society on the continent**
- **Displacement of public service provision towards citizens and their organizations**

To be considered for review and acceptance, an abstract must meet the standards as set out in the ISTR Call for Contributions. The abstract must indicate significant theoretical and empirical rigor. The abstract should be 500 words in length and should be sent to Dr. Priscilla Wamucii at wamucii@gmail.com

Selection of abstracts will follow ISTR's process of blind review.

Travel grants may be available for a limited number of participants. Please indicate that you want to be considered for a travel grant when you submit your abstract. We will then ask you to provide additional documentation.

ISTR Africa Network Organising Committee