

Civil Society in the Americas: between authoritarian submission and democratic autonomy

Democratic institutions to avoid mixing with ostensible humanitarian or academic networks that compromise the survival and recognition of civil society as a space of/for autonomous agents and causes

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Distinguishing parastatal organizations, which ultimately serve to legitimize autocracy by muddying the waters of development work, from civil society is critical for not wasting funding and attention on democratically hollow institutions and networks. Degrees of freedom from governmental duress mark this distinction. In Russia and China, the governments continue closing numerous organizations that promote rights and agendas distinct to official party lines. In the Americas, for example, the degree to which social organizations loyal to the governments of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) can criticize governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, as compared to civil society in developed democracies, highlights this spectrum. The cost of dissent stratifies civil society autonomy within democracies as well, although on a less steep scale. These distinctions between autocratic submission and democratic autonomy become clearer during crises.

The democratic world has suffered new losses in its global competition against autocracy under the combined weight of the pandemic, the resulting economic crises, and the exacerbation of existing conflicts. As tracked by a study published by Freedom House, the civic losses in sites like Hong Kong, Venezuela, Thailand, Turkey, India and Brazil, combined with the relative losses of advanced democracies, took a serious toll on freedom around the world. On a global level, the countries that experienced some democratic deterioration exceed, in number, those that registered improvements. Democratic recession is deepening and spreading. The relative resilience of democracies, and civil society's capacity for safeguarding democratic principles, have both fallen further into question.

This global trend came to a critical point in Trump's America. Organizations emblematic of American civil society—Open Society (OS), The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and Freedom

House (FH)—took diverse public stances in defense of American citizenship. When the White House threatened to suppress the protests in Washington D.C. and other cities, these organizations—and many more—condemned the authoritarian tendencies of President Trump. They stood in solidarity with the protesters, they declared their commitment against racism, and they denounced the attempts to erode democracy. They simultaneously supported activists and organizations with democratic goals internationally, even within right-wing governments reminiscent of Trump doctrine. They broke from the executive branch, at least rhetorically, at most politically.

These statements came with their own risk of political fallout, particularly for those that receive government funding. Even American civil society is subject to certain governmental duress despite being an advanced democracy. However, the shortcomings of compromised democracies should not preclude the reflective examination of developed ones. The price for dissent in autocracies is categorically higher, but funding and networks are still a steep cost for crossing political lines in the United States. Regardless, they all took a stand within the confines of their organizational mandates.

NED and their four associated institutions toed this delicate line after the violent incidents in Washington on January 6th. They affirmed that “A fundamental tenet of democracy is the peaceful contest of ideas among fellow citizens under law. After a free and fair election, when incumbents are defeated, a peaceful transfer of power must result. It is through such democratic processes that fundamental freedoms are protected, and opportunity and justice are possible for all.” While not inflammatory or controversial, NED’s timing was sharp. For fear of being accused of meddling in domestic affairs, which is explicitly outside of NED’s congressional mandate, they stood up for broad democratic principles.

NED also finances numerous organizations in Latin America — not few of which of progressive agendas — that promote democracy in the face of notorious right-wing governments. In Guatemala, they support organizations like the Asociación Diálogos and Guatemala Visible y Sociedad Civil No-Ficción (addressing citizenship security, the

supervision of electoral and constitutional tribunals, and threats against the rule of law). In Duque's Colombia, they have supported the Fundación Paz y Reconciliación (focused on governmental transparency), the Corporación Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad (supporting community media against threats for their work), and the Corporación Casa de la Mujer (empowering women leaders and defenders of their communities), among other organizations. Furthermore, in Bolsonaro's Brazil, they have recently supported the Instituto Tecnologia e Equidade (countering disinformation in local elections), and Politizar, Instituto de Educación Política (promoter of a tolerant culture and constructive dialogue), on agendas clearly against the president's populist agenda.

In parallel, OS approved extraordinary support for the empowerment of African American communities in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests. The organization, funded by George Soros, stated that "In order to support the historic movement of this nation towards racial justice, Foundations of the Open Society announce investments totaling in \$220 million in emergent organizations and leaders that empower black communities in all countries, betting their capacity to carry today's impulse towards a better future." That being said, OS operates with comparably more freedom to NED by virtue of private financial backing.

OS' response to the January 6th insurrection reads: "We have seen astonishing scenes as hundreds of thugs incited by a criminal president invaded a country's legislative chambers and caused mayhem and death in an effort to overturn the result of a democratic election... Founded to promote human rights and justice around the world, Open Society has never been blind to the mote in America's own eye — a society with its brutal share of racial injustice and economic exclusion — but we, like so many, had counted on the authority of America's democratic process to provide a way forward." OS directly called out a "criminal president," despite the debilitatingly partisan weight of engaging the White House at the time.

OS has also supported projects and institutions with progressive agendas like the American Civil Liberties Union (recognized defender

of civil rights, and critic of the War on Terror's erosion of civil liberties), the Arab American Institute Foundation (that denounces the Israeli occupation and repression of the Palestinians), the Malcom Grassroots Movement and NACCP Legal Defense and Education (defenders of African Americans in North America), the national Council of La Raza (focused on the rights of immigrants), Planned Parenthood (promoted of women's rights), the Tide Foundation (Identified with the leftist agenda), and Voto Latino (group that encourages electoral membership amongst the Latino community), among other collectives. OS has also financed entities that work with official Cuban institutions, like the National Security Archive Project and the Cuba Program of the Latin American Studies of the University of Columbia. This latter institute is recognized for their academic collaboration with the University of Havana and the Superior Institute of International Relations.

FH —another permanent target of Beijing, Havana and Moscow — also dissented when the Trump Administration moved to disqualify the elections. Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House, affirmed that “According to the law and the US constitution, Donald Trump’s presidency will end at noon on January 20th. But as long as he maintains his false assertions about fraud — and his attempts to impose those fictions on other politicians, government institutions, and ordinary Americans—he will chip away at the foundations of our constitutional republic and damage the cause of free self-government more broadly.” Despite their dependency on federal funds, FH matched OS’s unambiguous denunciation of the Trump administration’s actions; [91% of FH’s total support and revenue came from federal grants without donor restrictions in fiscal year 2020.](#)

The above examples of civil society dissent raise the bar for humanitarian organizations with links to autocratic and populist regimes of any ideological sign. They reveal levels and modes of autonomy—always relative, but here palpable and real—of which centralized governing does not afford space for. This autonomy exists in democracy under diverse qualifications and limitations, of course, but society watches power and citizens criticize government in turn. This is absent in tyrannies where leaders, state, government, and party are a single thing, demanding absolute loyalty from their subjects.

The issue in Latin America with Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) is the same issue found in Russia and China with parastatal movements, think tanks and organizations which attempt to mimic autonomous civil society. Has ALBA ever condemned the violation of the Bolivarian constitution by President Maduro? Has the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba ever denounced the censure of artists of the island? Has the Unión Nacional de Juristas rejected the postponement of the legislative schedule previously approved by the National Assembly? Has the Comites de Defensa de la Revolución questioned the increases in prices of goods and services that affect already impoverished Cuban families? Organizations of the Bolivarian cloth — Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos y la Asamblea de Movimientos Sociales del ALBA, for example — are also far from taking oppositional stances anywhere on the spectrum between NED, OS and FH. Until they can question an outburst or error of the Diaz-Canel, Ortega or Maduro governments, without suffering threats of closing their headquarters, cutting off their funds, and being classified as mercenaries and agents of foreign powers, Bolivarian democracy bears an asterisk.

Whereas on the front of developed democracies, more still can be done to empower civil society to challenge democratic deterioration. The bar for autonomy should be censure without duress, regardless of federal funding. It is incumbent on democratic institutions to avoid mixing with ostensible humanitarian or academic networks that compromise the survival and recognition of civil society as a space of/for autonomous agents and causes. Democratic recession escalated during the pandemic, but autonomous civil society stood up where it could. Knowing the difference can make a world of difference in the struggles to come.