REVIEWS

Barriers to Effective Civil Society Organisations: Political, Social, and Financial Shifts. Ibrahim Natil, Vanessa Malila and Youcef Sai. London and New York: Routledge, 2020. 169 pages. ISBN: 9780367512583.

Since 2016, there have been consistent debates and discussions related to the increase of what has been called *democratic backsliding*, "the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo 2016, 5). More recent attempts at defining its nature and scope, and identifying the best indicators to measure it have tended to look at explanations related to either (a) the takeover of actors hitherto kept out or unintegrated by political norms of democratic governments such as military juntas, (b) the process of perverting the course of democratic competition through the expansion of executive powers, (c) electorate manipulation, (d) the public's experience of economic inequality veering them towards less-democratic actors, or (e) the faulty maintenance of a country's democratic institutions (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018).

At the same time, the literature has tended to either downplay or ignore the role of non-elite political actors (both in terms of action, inaction, or inability to participate) in relation to crises facing many countries. The role of civil society has been usually valorized when scholars turn their attention to what maintains a country's quality of democracy. It is only recently that studies have begun to acknowledge how and why civil society actors (CSAs) have become prime targets for political actors and regimes seeking to further undermine democracy. Among the many strategies, CSAs have been "stigmatized as arrogant, snobbish, selfish elites who have betrayed 'the people' and the country" and then subjected to criminal and political prosecution, often under the flimsiest of pretexts (Diamond 2020, 34).

This is not to say, of course, that this process has not been the bread-and-butter of civil society resistance even in the friendliest of times. The reality of a country's civil society sector being subjected to subtle, yet consistent

isolation is becoming more and more apparent, especially under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic wherein socio-economic inequalities became starker and more polarized, and political actors, by virtue of having access to resources, were likelier to be seen as "elites" than "a part of the majority."

The challenge of addressing these shortcomings is increasingly evident in the works of civil society research worldwide. The most recent is Ibrahim Natil, Vanessa Malila, and Youcef Sai's, *Barriers to Effective Civil Society Organizations* (2020), that stands as a recent attempt to not only theoretically synthesize these debates on how civil society organizations (CSOs) may survive unwelcome political contexts, but also the extent to which an organization can "crisis-proof" itself. Their study's conceptual framework relies on the notion of "a participatory civil society, researching civic engagement and development despite the challenges of shifts in foreign aid, political and social context" (8). The book's theoretical framework is illuminating and therefore bears reviewing in some detail, and it consists of acknowledging and analyzing three "shifts" which may cause these barriers and challenges:

1. **Political shift**. The CSOs' political presence almost always relies on the notion of legitimacy, i.e., to what extent are CSOs "able to mobilize resources and generate local support from the general public, philanthropists and private sector" (Wiggers 2016 as cited in Natil, Malila, and Sai 2020, 9). Inasmuch as this process is usually non-controversial (especially when the environment is friendly and constituencies are present), this affords CSOs a level of independence and strength that allows them to serve as countervailing forces to elite political interests, more so if they are taking the side of marginalized constituencies and advocating for their human rights entitlements. However, a "politically confrontational rights-based approach (RBA) by NGOs does not work in relation to authoritarian governments in developing countries as it irritates such governments and makes it impossible for CSOs to operate" (12).

2. **Funding shift.** The CSOs' operational capacities will almost always be enabled or hampered by their access to funding (domestic, international, or network-based). While the debates on challenges to funding are usually studied according to "a number of factors affecting bilateral donors, economic growth, and operational and financial restrictions stemming from political polarization and increased government hostility towards CSOs in various countries," other scholars would point to how this phenomenon is dependent on political shifts and the opportunities or threats they bring (Pousadela and Cruz 2016 as cited in Natil, Malila, and Sai 2020, 13).

3. **Social shift**. This shift refers to the changing circumstances that allows or inhibits the work of CSOs' in facilitating and establishing network assistances that can shore up "people's abilities to engage, opening up space for their involvement, facilitating dialogue and consensus building, providing access to information and mobilizing them for collective action" (Zlatareva 2008 as cited in Natil, Malila, and Sai 2020, 15). At the same time, these activities are also ultimately affected by the changing demographics of the society or country where the CSO is operating; how those demographics are being politically socialized and educated by public institutions—i.e. whether they see CSOs as normal actors within their political spaces or as foreign or hostile intruders;—and the extent to which social identities (based on race, religion, gender and the like) would engage in established CSO structures or build new organizations themselves.

The authors illustrate this phenomenon in their chosen case studies mostly situated in Western Asia and Africa (hotbeds of political discontent in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring) but also includes two Muslim faith-based CSOs in Ireland, a general reassessment of the civil society situation in Latin American countries, as well as a Southeast Asian representative in

Cambodia. The substantial country representation across what continues to be called "the developing world" highlights the challenges and clashes between the expectations of funding agencies toward the CSOs organizational capacities and the popular ownership of the democratization discourse in these states, in contrast to their actual experiences. Some organizations, activist groups, and movements may actively choose to formalize their relationship and integrate themselves into the political processes of their country (as illustrated by the case between the Muslim Irish CSOs and Morocco). However, these organizations also face the challenging reality of fulfilling the demands of desperate and destitute constituencies—should they clash with an intransigent state apparatus or ironically co-opted by the latter (as illustrated by the cases in Cambodia and Ecuador).

As a scholar of Philippine politics, I find merit in this framework not only due to its employment of close research and narrative assessment of political opportunities available to CSOs but because it also promotes a sense of urgency and internal responsibility amongst CSOs—those organizations operating within both favorable circumstances and hostile environments. The authors recommend, above other things, that CSOs (a) "come together to create an active network and effective local partnerships;" (b) "avoid any duplication in delivery and become resilient to sudden shifts;" and (c) "engage with other CSOs from their own field to share local resources in terms of planning, implementation and evaluation" (162). Their analyses, in fact, reflects Medina-Guce's (2020) assessment of how relational perspectives to power and governance, as is usually practiced in the context of CSOs, may either blind or limit their appreciation of the role of their collaboration with state entities in helping them achieve their objectives at the expense of legitimizing potentially hegemonic political elite or coalition.

Nevertheless, I also find that the approach of this volume (particularly its framework) can be further nuanced, reconciled, or recontextualized with previous literature that analyzes the motivations and action choices of civil society actors—especially when it comes to relating and coalescing with their fellow organizations. The case studies of *Barriers to Effective Civil Society*

Organizations have illustrated that a number of civil society efforts have either been co-opted or compromised because certain political alliances were rent asunder by some coalition members eventually valuing more their access to government over the cohesion of the wider pro-democracy and accountability alliances they initially chose to be part of. While this can be chalked up to simple *divide et impera* on the part of political elites and would-be authoritarians, this is, nonetheless, an opportunity to further interrogate what exactly can hinder civil society actors from building independent and long-standing constituencies that will support them for them, and not solely for their reliability and activity during key political junctures. A sustainable civil society activity, much like the normalization of democratic values and processes, will still rely largely on popular ownership and support.

These observations more clearly emerges in the context of Southeast Asia, especially when we look at major political attempts at asserting civil society resistance under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. If public sentiment and vulnerability find common cause with embattled civil society actors, it is possible to weather even the most brutal of authoritarian crackdowns. The 2021 coup in Myanmar provided fuel to the Myanmar Civil Disobedience Movement, where "Gen Z anti-coup efforts…unified inter-generational struggles against military dictatorship and colonialism and forged a bond of common purpose between the Bamar majority and the ethnic minorities. It has also sustained the inclusion of labour, the civil service and disparate political parties, and civil society actors" (Jordt, Than, and Lin 2021, 32). In the same vein, the incompetence of the Thai junta in managing the COVID-19 pandemic also provided an opportunity for CSOs to reunite and mount public opposition—even at the height of intensified repression and further attempts at stymieing legal action (Auethavornpipat and Tanyag 2021, 22-25).

By contrast, civil society in the Philippines is already fractured and disunited by their overlapping attempts at rapprochement with the government under the presidencies of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Benigno Aquino III. This position has left them divided in their choices

of resistance under President Rodrigo Duterte's mismanagement of the pandemic, as well as in their attempts at building new constituencies to support them beyond mutual aid and advocacy for vulnerable sectors. It was even reflected in the fragmentation or lack of clear unity in civil society support for national political candidates in the 2022 national and local elections. The electoral race took a more existential character due to the candidacy and eventual landslide victory of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr.—son of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, as proclaimed last 25 May 2022 (Venzon 2022). This tide is representative of revisionist actors dedicated to whitewashing and absolving his family's historical crimes.

Under the first 100 days of Marcos Jr.'s presidency, significant cultural and institutional efforts are pursued to deny his family's longstanding liabilities in Philippine society. Government bodies such as the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the purported National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) have become more brazen in attempting to delegitimize activist organizations, even clashing with the mandates of the Department of Justice (Reyes and Pazzibugan 2022). The challenge of CSAs' preservation of their objectives and accumulation of support under less friendly climes and ensuring that they do not become inadvertently roped into tying their own nooses, becomes progressively clearer in the context of the world's contentious political climate. Whether Philippine civil society groups are simply biding their time and keeping their ground or are being put in a greater risk of sliding into further marginalization, we can only wait and keep vigilant.

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