

# **‘Civil society dynamics under authoritarian rule’**

**Workshop organised by ECPR, Lisbon, 14-19 April 2009**

**Report by Paul Aarts**

This meeting was one of thirty workshops organized by the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) during its so-called Joint Sessions, in Lisbon from April 14 to 19 2009. It was one of a series of workshops which carried the term ‘civil society’ in its title.<sup>1</sup> On behalf of the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, Paul Aarts and Marlies Glasius from the University of Amsterdam participated.

**The workshop was directed by Ellen Lust-Okar & Francesco Cavatorta.** Lust-Okar is working at Yale University and has a solid reputation as a researcher on the ‘politics of authoritarian elections’. Her latest book, *Political Participation in the Middle East* (Lynne Rienner Publishers 2008, co-edited with Saloua Zerhouni) is an illustration of that. Cavatorta teaches International Relations at Dublin City University (Ireland) and is, I guess, by far the most prolific author on civil society in the Middle East and North Africa. He wrote loads of articles, mainly on the Maghreb countries, and is co-editor (with Frédéric Volpi) of the recent volume *Democratization in the Muslim World* (Routledge 2007). His forthcoming book is titled *International Dimension of the Failed Algerian Transition. Democracy Betrayed?* (Manchester University Press). Cavatorta also is the main author of a research project on civil society in the Arab world, commissioned by the Human Rights and Democratisation Committee of Irish Aid (confidential report), which ends with some policy recommendations that might be useful to look at.

**The basic reason to organize the workshop** was the growing doubt, in particular in studies about the Middle East (but not only the Middle East), about the perceived causal link between civil society activism and democratisation. We see ourselves confronted with, let’s say, two sets of scholarly work examining the influence and role of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts from conflicting perspectives and with conflicting empirical evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> Full bibliographical details of books and papers that are mentioned, if not provided here, can be supplied by the author of this report.

What follows from one set of these studies is that the linkage between civil society and democratisation might not be as straightforward as often is assumed. Civil society activism in authoritarian contexts might work quite differently and recent studies claim that in these settings it might in fact lead to a reinforcement of authoritarian practices rather than to the development of pro-democracy social capital (foremost Jamal 2007, but also Albrecht 2005 and Albrecht & Kassem 2009, forthcoming). So in light of new theoretical and empirical findings it seems interesting to understand how civil society under authoritarianism is subject to different opportunity structures than CS in established democracies. Moreover, it's interesting to see whether there are significant regional differences? More specifically, is civil society activism in the Middle East and North Africa different from civil society activism in Eastern Europe, Latin America or Africa, and if so, why? As you notice from the list of the papers there was a wide geographical range, but also a variety of methodologies have been presented – including single-case studies, comparative case studies (both sub-national and cross-national), and very different types of authoritarianism were considered – from Burma and China to ‘softer’ forms of authoritarianism in Jordan and Mexico. **So what came out of the sessions in which seventeen papers have been discussed? Briefly: three main conclusions.**

**First, there seemed to be agreement on the notion that the ‘traditional’ definition of CS (as comprising only formal organizations) does not work.** There were quite a few different conceptualizations of CS, i.e. a wide range of foci: from (1) the formally organized associations (like professional associations, environmental organizations, faith-based associations, economic cooperatives) via (2) the less formally organized communities like artist communities and diaspora groups, (3) the ‘unorganized’ civil society through engagements during soccer matches (‘spaces of contention’), till (4) notions like ‘civility’ (Volpi paper). So the concept is ‘stretched’ so to speak and there was a clear longing for ‘moving beyond CS’ (it was even suggested as the title of a special issue of a journal based on a selection of the papers presented). One suggestion was to introduce the concept of ‘activist citizenship’ or ‘activated citizenship’ (in the context of which I referred to the Civic Driven Change project of Kees Biekart and Alan Fowler).

**Second, no matter which concept is being used, there seems to be no necessary link to democratization.** There was a near consensus that one should go beyond teleological thinking, i.e. thanks to civil society activism, authoritarian systems are not necessarily on the

way towards democracy, but may represent new modes of non-democratic governance. In this context we had quite some discussion on ‘horizontal’ versus ‘vertical’ voice, i.e. sometimes one seems to be satisfied with having voice for ones own, without necessarily claiming voice for everyone. One colleague, Andreas Schedler, remarked that it might be wise to stop trying to find a causal link between the independent variable (CS) and the dependent variable (democratisation) because “There are simply too many (other) explanatory factors”.<sup>2</sup>

**Third, there seemed to be agreement on how the state should be – or should not be – characterized.** Less than viewing the state as simply a relatively unified actor (the ‘mukhabarat state’, acting on repressing opposition and staying in power), it seems that most scholars adopted a more nuanced view of state engagement and they prefer to speak about the ‘interdependence’ between the state and parts of civil society, noting that sometimes state organizations rely upon and indeed need associations for their own survival and vice versa! (Clarke paper). Make room for studies on intra-regime contradictions.

Let me end with some disperse notes:

- Several times I heard cynical remarks on the ‘Holy Grail of the Internet’, i.e. there is clear doubt about the democratizing potential of internet (Wagner most outspoken, ‘vs’ Hoffmann and Volpi) Unfortunately, we did not have a real discussion on the ‘romanticized’ notion of internet.<sup>3</sup>
- Actually just one paper dealt with more with political than with civil society (Andreas Schedler), which should give us food for thought...though there are some references in bibliographies<sup>4</sup>
- In the discussions, only a few times Syria was mentioned and Iran only sporadically (though one paper had a small case study on Christian communities in Syria<sup>5</sup>). On Syria (as

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<sup>2</sup> A title which resurfaces time and again, but has not been read so far, is Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, Cambridge University Press 2007. One of the attending colleagues, Pedro Ramos Pinto, made reference to a book which has so far escaped our attention (at least mine): Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Association*, Princeton University Press 2000. It assesses the conditions in which associations contribute *or not* to democracy - <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/6972.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ben Wagner sent me a long list of references (some look extremely useful) on this subject.

<sup>4</sup> Like Michelle Penner-Angrist, *Party-Building in the Modern Middle East*, University of Washington Press 2006; and D. Stevens, ‘Political Society and Civil Society in Uzbekistan – Never the Twain Shall Meet?’, *Central Asian Survey*, 26(1), 2007, pp. 49-64.

<sup>5</sup> Fiona McCallum, ‘Religious Institutions and Civil Society under Authoritarianism Rule: The Middle East Christian Example’.

compared to Tunisia) it was said that the geopolitical aspect should not be overlooked. The paper on Tunisia showed this case might offer comparative perspectives for Iran and Syria.<sup>6</sup>

- Surprisingly, there was no paper on the role of business associations (only in footnote in Entelis, p. 7; in bibliography one interesting title: Melani Cammett, *Globalization, Business Politics and Development: North Africa in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press 2007).<sup>7</sup>
- For comparative perspectives, reference was made to Mehran Kamrava, 'The Middle East's democracy deficit in comparative perspective', *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 6(1), 2007, pp. 189-213; and Mehran Kamrava & Frank O. Mora, 'Civil society and democratisation in comparative perspective: Latin America and the Middle East', *Third World Quarterly*, 19(5), 1998, pp. 893-915. Andreas Schedler<sup>8</sup> sent me a copy of *APSA Newsletter*, offering perspectives on the role of cross-regional comparison (for example by Evelyne Huber).
- The shortest definition of democracy I heard was: 'voice and choice'.

**Amsterdam, 2 June 2009**

**Paul Aarts**

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<sup>6</sup> John P. Entelis, 'Contestation and Resistance in Tunisia: Locating Civic Politics in a "New" Public Space'.

<sup>7</sup> Add to this Clement M. Henry, *The Mediterranean Debt Crescent. Money and Power in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey*, University Press of Florida 1996; and Clement M. Henry & Robert Springborg, *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*, Cambridge University Press 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Schedler is the editor of *Electoral Authoritarianism. The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Lynne Rienner Publishers 2006).