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Civil Society and the Global Pandemic: Building Back Different?

Carnegie Civic Research Network

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Introduction

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, civic activists around the world have shifted into a higher gear. As Carnegie's Civic Research Network analyzed last year, the gravity of the health emergency has pushed many civil society organizations (CSOs) to engage in new ways to help alleviate the pandemic's impact.¹ Sometimes they have done this in cooperation with governments, but other times they have acted on their own out of frustration at governments' sluggish and inadequate responses to the emergency. At the same time, many activists have had to defend themselves as governments have used the pandemic as a pretext for further clamping down on independent civil society voices, under the cover of emergency laws passed to help manage the crisis.

As civic activists grapple with the challenges of the pandemic, they are also turning their attention to the long term. It is clear that the pandemic will reshape economics, politics, and international relations, but it is not yet clear how. Many countries are undergoing major economic upheaval and are searching for new economic templates to overcome the damage they have experienced. On the political side, the pandemic has fueled authoritarian actions and damaged the credibility of many democratic governments. Post-pandemic political life will likely entail heightened struggles for democracy and a search for new democratic practices that more effectively meet citizens' needs. With regard to geopolitics, the pandemic is contributing to still greater tensions between the world's major powers.

Because of these factors, the pandemic is likely to have a long-term impact on the nature of civil society worldwide. Civil society has already adapted to the coronavirus pandemic through the growth of self-help activism. Looking further ahead, civic actors are helping

to spark a rethink of economic models. In the political sphere, at least some civic actors are engaging in efforts to revitalize democratic politics, including through new ideas on technology's role in post-pandemic politics. Finally, civil society is being reshaped by geopolitical competition: some civil society actors are being pulled into the Chinese and Russian orbits, while others are more firmly resisting political encroachment by these powers. In an overarching sense, civic activists are juggling uneasily at present as they focus on the immediate challenges of the pandemic while also trying to fashion new economic, political, and geostrategic agendas for the period after the pandemic.²

Self-Help Civil Society

While there have been sharply polarized political debates and large-scale protests related to the pandemic (examined below), perhaps the most striking trend in civil society has been the spread of informal activism—forms of self-organization aimed at practical problem solving. Since the coronavirus first broke out in late 2019, many civic organizations have been reshaping themselves around more practical types of community action. As they have responded to the pandemic emergency, they have been able to build a new kind of legitimacy for their activities rooted in issues of direct concern to local communities. These kinds of civic initiatives have played a major role in mitigating the pandemic's severity, countering government failings, and pushing official authorities into better health and social responses. They betoken a significant change in the form of individual citizens seeking to take on more responsibility from both long-established CSOs and the state.

While most governments introduced restrictions on civil society activities as part of their initial crisis management strategies, the coronavirus pandemic story is not only about the closing of civic spaces but also about the opening of new civic spaces. These emergent civic spaces have, in some countries, involved national and local authorities facilitating CSO and social movement cooperation on health, social, economic, and community service provision issues.

Even as governments have sought to hinder civil society on some issues, they have encouraged civic activity on pandemic-related issues. They have done so out of a genuine realization that such major challenges require societal involvement and cannot be managed by top-down state injunctions alone. More self-servingly, governments have sometimes sought to off-load some of the responsibility for crisis management onto other policy actors. Either way, the results are reconfigured relationships between states and civil societies, with the latter having demonstrated their relevance and utility in such trying times.

A significant element of this change comes from emerging actors displacing traditional CSOs. Prominent examples of such emerging actors dramatically gaining influence during the pandemic include village communities in India, mutual aid societies in Chile, solidarity

networks in Mexico, and youth movements in Nigeria. In Serbia, a new network of local organizations has run an awareness raising campaign to educate citizens on the public health and societal benefits of vaccination, winning a degree of legitimacy for themselves as the government has narrowed democratic space.

A ramification is that, at least in some countries, civil society will come out of the pandemic with improved ties to government initiatives. In South Korea, the government's successful approach to combatting the pandemic has involved close cooperation with civil society; about one-fifth of all government initiatives related to the pandemic have been in formal partnerships with civil society.³ South Korean CSOs have geared their efforts toward delivering supplies to vulnerable populations and the broader community.⁴ In Romania, the Red Cross Society has offered the government a high level of logistical support and has worked in permanent collaboration with central and local authorities on the pandemic.⁵

The pandemic-triggered changes have also prompted civic organizations to shift their policy agendas. Many more civic groups now focus on rectifying poor healthcare provision. Brazilian environmental CSOs have switched their focus to help distribute respirators to landless movements, while many social movements in the country have sought to combat the government's denialism and misinformation over the pandemic. One study on Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan uncovered a growing number of very locally rooted citizen oversight mechanisms related to pandemic relief and support.⁶ In South Africa, one civic initiative has developed forty coronavirus testing teams to make up for government failures to develop a comprehensive testing program.⁷ In India, young volunteers on Instagram and Twitter have helped people look for hospital beds and oxygen cylinders, replacing government helplines and becoming new collectives in the process.

Furthermore, to bridge the digital divide, many civic movements have taken up a neighborhood-level agenda of shared internet access, which has become much more consequential since the pandemic began. Clusters of activism have also intensified around housing vulnerability and high rental costs. Violence against women has increased during the pandemic and is another issue commanding more attention from activists.⁸ For example, Tunisian women's groups have formed to lobby courts to hear gender violence cases. A UK grassroots federation called Women's Aid pressed the government to fund services to mitigate domestic abuse at an early stage in the pandemic and secured emergency funding for curbing domestic abuse.⁹ Activists in Turkey paid heightened attention to increased violence against women and femicide during the pandemic, in particular after the government withdrew from the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women.¹⁰ In Egypt, quarantine-related lockdown sparked gender-rights campaigns as social media became a platform for women's testimonials of sexual assault and domestic violence.¹¹

To the extent that formal civil society bodies have struggled to adapt, informal civic action has grown stronger. Such informal networks and actors have not appeared out of nowhere and have been gaining ground for a decade, but the pandemic has brought them even more clearly to the fore. Common problems at the community level have generated

broad and often unlikely coalitions, for instance between urban human rights groups and rural Indigenous movements. While social reliance on digital platforms has in many ways increased, the crisis has also dragged many activists back to community organizing: some strands of post-pandemic global civil society have an old-fashioned flavor of traditional community outreach methods. While the self-help strand of post-pandemic activism is not displacing more confrontational forms of organization (that are covered below), it has created influential networks of practical solidarity and partnership.

Activism on Economic Challenges

Beyond governments' contrasting records on tackling the spread of the coronavirus, the pandemic has revealed structural shortcomings in many economic systems. Around the world, many countries are now debating how their economic systems should change as a response to hard lessons learned from the pandemic about supply chains, state capacities, and societal resilience. Civic activists have become part of these widespread efforts to rethink and revise prevailing economic models as they begin to plan for the post-pandemic period. More CSOs are focused on economic challenges, although with mixed evidence as to whether this involves deep reconsideration of economic models or rather more immediate concerns over the post-pandemic recovery.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed serious failings in the economic models currently followed by governments around the world. It has raised new questions about some elements of globalization. The pandemic has revealed how dependent many countries have become on global supply chains in strategically vital goods like medical equipment—and how easily these networks can be interrupted, including for political reasons. These failings have engendered much debate about onshoring and other means of shortening these supply chains.

The pandemic has also amplified the effects of inequalities associated with governments' economic and social policies and have increased such inequality in many countries. Vulnerable sections of society have suffered disproportionately. Economic and social inequalities have translated into deeply unequal access to medical treatment. The economic consequences of the pandemic have been borne heavily by the poorer sections of many societies; those unable to work from home have been exposed to far higher risks of infection. The economic and social inequalities that have been accumulating for many years have, in a very direct way, become a matter of life and death. At least in some countries, large-scale government measures to reduce the economic devastation wrought by the pandemic have opened previously bounded debates about the scope of government interventionism.

As these debates have opened within governments and in multilateral organizations like the World Bank, they have gained even greater resonance among civic activists. In general,

CSOs whose previous focus had mostly been on civil and political rights have deepened their focus on socioeconomic rights in their programming and advocacy work. Although some civic activists have long pressed for radical changes to prevailing economic models, the pandemic has widened the realm of actors pushing for far-reaching socioeconomic reform.

The pandemic has also broadened the landscape of changes that activists are pressing for. Many activists are looking beyond the long-established anti-neoliberal critique and are instead exploring ideas based around community-level economic and social resilience. To some extent, civil societies in the developing world and in emerging economies seem to be supporting more forward-looking visions in seeking an adjusted form of globalization, while many Western groups are retreating into a more defensive, populism-fueled withdrawal.

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A few select examples clearly illustrate this trend. In Turkey, groups such as the Deep Poverty Network, which was established in late 2019, have become more active and vocal during the pandemic. Other organizations and NGOs working with the most disadvantaged populations, like refugees and seasonal workers, have also shifted their attention to urban poverty and related concerns. For now, these groups are focused on dealing with the immediate impact of the pandemic, but a broader critique of economic models is driving their emerging agendas.

In Argentina, social movements and civic organizations close to the national governing coalition have pushed a local plan for post-pandemic reconstruction built around new ideas and policies about state interventionism, taxes, and urban planning. In Brazil, the fact that many workers have been put at such risk during the pandemic has spurred a heightened focus on workers' rights: a broad coalition of CSOs has lobbied the parliament for a relief fund and has pushed successfully for a monthly stipend that was three times the value initially suggested by the national government.¹²

In Asia, economic grievances have been a major driver of new forms of activism. Small businesses and informal workers, who were most affected by the economic shutdown following the lockdowns, have mobilized for government compensation. In India and Indonesia, poor working conditions worsened by the pandemic have propelled unions to collaborate with informal worker groups. Such collaboration has culminated in civic pushback against the two governments' instrumentalization of the pandemic to enforce new laws related to labor and privatization.¹³ A network of more than twenty-five Indian civil society groups conducted a series of online meetings entitled "Reimagining the Future" to debate new economic ideas.¹⁴ In Mongolia, development and community organizations have shifted focus to new forms of support to marginalized communities, such as disabled individuals the government has neglected.

In South Korea, 530 CSOs formed a coalition to advocate more far-reaching and structural changes to make the country's economic model more inclusive.¹⁵ In Thailand, the group Wefair has emerged from the country's 2020 pro-democracy protests, linking the problem of economic inequality exacerbated by the pandemic with the concentration of political power in the hands of royalist elites.¹⁶ The group seeks to promote welfare policies including higher wages, affordable education fees, and better universal healthcare. More broadly in Southeast Asia, CSOs now talk more than they did before about the need for a reconsideration of the economic status quo.

In Zimbabwe, the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union has pushed for economic reforms to address inequalities. The Zimbabwe National Students Union has also focused more on highlighting unequal access to education, which has become more apparent during the pandemic. And the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum has pushed harder for recognition and protection of informal economy workers.

Across Europe, the pandemic has intensified an existing trend toward local, informal activism, organized especially around calls for new, substantive, European Union (EU) economic policies. This activism is different from both traditional European models of civil society and purely horizontal grassroots movements not engaged on this wider EU-level economic agenda. In particular, this activism is pressing for an EU agenda based on community welfare and against open trade and markets.¹⁷

In some countries, activism related to climate change has acted as a channel for efforts to reassess economic models. Climate change activists in the Philippines, Laos, and Vietnam have raised awareness regarding the linkage between the pandemic and environmental degradation by, for instance, launching campaigns against the use of plastics.¹⁸ Indian CSOs have pressed for coronavirus containment measures to be linked to environmental and climate justice. In Turkey, environmental CSOs have picked up and harnessed the momentum behind two campaigns—#AdilYileşme (#JustRecovery) and #AdilDönüşüm (#JustTransformation)—in an attempt to build ecological issues into Turkish economic models.¹⁹ Some of these kinds of initiatives have led to broad coalition building across rural and urban social movements and CSOs: in Brazil, many organizations have coordinated

to support family farmers, linking this to the pandemic's lesson that healthy, local food supplies need to be encouraged.

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One of the biggest questions about the pandemic's long-term effects is whether these new impulses will translate into actual change. On this, the evidence is not conclusive. Many CSOs are for now more focused on the short-term imperatives involved in rebuilding after the crisis and less on the wider agenda of generating new types of economic models. The immediate imperatives of

the health crisis mean that some of these groups have not thought much about longer-term agendas yet. While many CSOs see their new focus on healthcare rights as a way into and part of a wider economic rethink, they admit to having capacity shortfalls in trying to cover both these levels of policy. In practice, for now many have oriented toward service delivery roles and somewhat away from confrontational, transformative advocacy.²⁰

The coronavirus pandemic has amplified the injustices of neoliberalism but has also brought in a new era of big government and high government spending. Activists that were previously focused on austerity and anticapitalist mobilization still need to position themselves firmly in relation to this new era. They will need to show they can generate well-grounded and practical economic ideas and have the capacity to work with other actors to take these ideas forward. For the moment, many are understandably focused mainly on their own precarious finances and survival as much as on engineering new economic models.

Activism Involving Political Struggles

Equally significant struggles are underway in the political sphere, including over different models of governance. A key emerging feature is the interlinking of the pandemic and more political civil society agendas: the pandemic has played an indirect role in reshaping civil society actions in relation to human rights and democracy. Scores of protests have taken place against governments' coronavirus containment measures; many of these have overlapped with preexisting forms of mobilization against regimes for a whole range of political motives.

In Southeast Asia, the pandemic has intertwined with deeper political predicaments such as the democratic breakdown in Myanmar and autocratic repression in Thailand. In Hong Kong, the pandemic has added fuel to the city's democratic protests. Following the initial viral outbreak in mainland China, Hong Kong's citizens pushed the government to impose border controls. In February 2020, more than 7,000 medical workers launched a five-day strike to demand border closures and better medical protections.²¹ As the crisis unfolded in Hong Kong, opposition politicians and activists initiated a number of protests against official measures such as the establishment of quarantine centers.²² At the core of these disputes was the fact that the Hong Kong government closely followed mainland practices without consulting local political and civic actors. Hong Kong's civil society actors have politicized the health crisis to galvanize their pro-democracy campaigning.

In Thailand, one major opposition party that the country's Constitutional Court dissolved in 2020 re-formed as a social movement supporting candidates on a platform of promising more local democracy as a means of improving citizens' say over healthcare issues.²³ In Indonesia, labor activists protested against President Joko Widodo's attempt to relax Indonesia's business, labor, and environmental laws.²⁴ They believed that, in light of the

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pandemic, the government was becoming increasingly illiberal, catering to the interests of large companies at the expense of ordinary citizens. In Indonesia and Nepal, feminist movements have gained increasing traction in democracy struggles by connecting the hike in sexual violence during the pandemic with authoritarian dynamics.²⁵ In India, protests spread, with the farmers' movement spinning off from multiple other revolts. These trends show that issues beyond the coronavirus have not been displaced by the pandemic but have commanded more activist attention.

Similar trends are increasingly evident across the Middle East and North Africa. In Libya, CSOs are focused on advancing a fragile peace accord. In Lebanon, protests against lockdowns became part of a wider campaign against the costs of elite corruption made even more evident by the pandemic. In Tunisia, CSOs organized in 2020 around the country's ongoing financial and political crises before intensifying efforts in mid-2021 due to soaring COVID-19 death rates and the government's botched vaccine rollout.²⁶ In this case, pandemic activism and political rivalries nourished each other to the point of the president sacking the prime minister and suspending parliament after protests in July 2021.²⁷ In Algeria, the Hirak movement resumed its opposition to the incumbent regime, buoyed by pandemic-related frustrations.

In such countries, political tensions are acute, and the pandemic has acted as a secondary or indirect amplifier of underlying societal frustrations over governance failings. Regimes in these countries have also been more violent in cracking down on protesters, not directly due to coronavirus infection concerns but under the cloak of such concerns. These crackdowns have fueled further bouts of anti-regime activism. Turkey provides another example of indirect linkages between the pandemic and wider political agendas: many civic organizations have turned to focus on the negative impact on human rights of government pandemic responses.

Activism in Africa has likewise followed political trajectories separate from the pandemic and yet has also been galvanized by the crisis. The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria emerged in October 2020 after a video of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) shooting a young man went viral.²⁸ This movement has brought together a wide range of different actors and harnessed background frustration with the government's handling of the pandemic. In Zimbabwe, the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition has ratcheted up human rights campaigning, and a number of youth-led initiatives and social movements like the Zimbabwe People Power Movement have also started to organize and agitate for democracy as political space narrows even more in the country. The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum is providing services to human rights defenders and citizens whose rights have been violated under the guise of lockdown measures.²⁹ CSOs such as the Heal Zimbabwe Trust, the Zimbabwe

Lawyers for Human Rights, the Counselling Services Unit, and the forum have increased support to activists as state repression has intensified. They have also increased their advocacy for human rights and linked their arguments to pandemic-related injustices.

In Chile, a broad coalition of CSOs and opposition parties was able to win a referendum that approved a new constitutional assembly, which will finally reform the country's dictatorship-era constitution.³⁰ Brazil provides a good example of a particularly indignant eruption of protests stirred up by inadequate hospital resourcing, lack of investment in vaccines, and President Jair Bolsonaro's misinformation campaigns—demonstrations that have been feeding on earlier protests related to police brutality and anti-Black racism.³¹

If the pandemic has added fuel to political protests and activism, many of these cases show that it has also involved a growing focus on alternative models of democracy due to the obvious governance failings of many democracies, particularly along dimensions of inclusion and equity. It has also done so because of the success of community self-help responses and the way these signal a potential renaissance of new, local forms of democracy. And the fact that some authoritarian regimes have performed as well as democracies have, or in some cases better—at least in terms of case counts and death rates—has also opened conversations about the value of democracy and the need to renovate it fundamentally. Young Polish climate activists and pro-choice demonstrators, for example, have pushed harder for new forms of direct and deliberative democracy.

Democracy-related activism has included a prominent digital element too. In Southeast Asia, tech-savvy citizens have created crowdsourced online platforms that draw information regarding coronavirus cases and vaccination progress from CSO reports. One example is Indonesia's KawalCOVID19, which has, since March 2020, provided real-time updates about the pandemic. In Taiwan, civic-led digital initiatives have dramatically strengthened during the pandemic. The government imposed a rationing scheme for masks, which were initially in short supply; in response, civic hackers created an online platform to provide real-time availability of masks at distribution centers.³² Audrey Tang, the digital minister who was formerly a high-tech entrepreneur, made governmental data available so that these applications were more useful for citizen users.³³ In Turkey, civil society-led digital platforms were launched in opposition-held municipalities to match donations to citizens unable to pay for basic services.

All this shows that civic activists have begun to reformulate their political agendas in ways that are integrally linked to the pandemic's challenges. But some types of protest have had less positive ramifications. Some protests—in places such as Algeria, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nepal, and Tunisia—have been driven by people's fears of contracting COVID-19. There have been protests against authorities' plans to turn local hotels into isolation centers, against the cremation of COVID-19 victims in local cemeteries or temples, and against the arrival of outsiders suspected of spreading the virus. In Indonesia, hundreds of people held a demonstration against the arrival of around 500 Chinese workers.³⁴ In Venezuela, protesters demanded the border be closed to prevent the arrival of migrant

workers from neighboring countries. These kinds of fear-driven activism often took place when citizens had reason to doubt the veracity of government-provided information about the pandemic, as official incompetence generated uncertainties about the health emergency.

In another fast-emerging strand of political activism whose implications for democracy are still profoundly uncertain, the pandemic has unleashed a potent type of libertarian activism that deploys the language of democratic rights but embodies a relatively disruptive and unrestrained hostility to authority and state rules. This trend has changed the policy equation over liberal rights in many countries. While some conventional progressive civil society groups have mobilized over concerns about governments' restrictive measures and many mainstream actors have accepted the medical necessity of such provisions, it has been more illiberal or radical groups that have taken the firmest and loudest stands in favor of rights and freedoms being restored.

To many, this mobilization for liberal freedoms has smacked of irresponsibility and has even been closely associated with COVID-19 denialism. The apparent inversion of positions over liberal rights has stirred up the civic sphere in curious and unpredictable ways. While in some countries the pandemic has put populists on the back foot, it also leaves a legacy of often belligerent activism against top-down executive governance and the influence of experts. While some of this impulse will subside as governments restore degrees of post-emergency openness, some of these sentiments will persist and portend conflictive changes to civil society over the longer term. At this level, the global civil society that emerges from the pandemic is set to be more turbulent and more infused with competing notions of democratic freedoms.

Activism and Pandemic Geopolitics

At a final level, the geopolitics of the pandemic are set to have far-reaching impacts on civic activism worldwide. The pandemic has intensified both pro-democratic agendas and what might be termed authoritarian civics. Activism has been caught up in and affected by the changing geopolitics of the pandemic. And this dynamic situation is having starkly contrasting impacts across different countries and different types of civil society groups.

The fact that so many established democracies have not dealt with the pandemic effectively is weakening their reputation among activists in other countries worldwide. Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy, combined with what is perceived as the West's vaccine nationalism, have left an impact on CSO views and agendas. Above all else, many CSOs understand that vaccine development has accentuated inequality between the rich and developing worlds, and they tend to blame the democratic West for this more than China or Russia—even though Western states have overall donated more vaccines than either of

these countries.³⁵ So far, this dynamic has proven more powerful than any consideration of Western vaccines being more reliable or sense that China and Russia are attaching more political conditions to their vaccine rollouts.³⁶ Various organizations including Amnesty International, Free the Vaccine, Frontline AIDS, Global Justice Now, Oxfam International, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, and the Yunus Centre established the People's Vaccine Alliance to ensure equitable access to the vaccine worldwide: their campaign has targeted mainly Western governments and pharmaceutical companies.³⁷

In Southeast Asia, the Chinese government's vaccine diplomacy has enhanced its legitimacy at a societal level in the region. This development has worked against democracy activists in the Philippines and Myanmar. Particularly in Cambodia, where Chinese influence is entrenched, Prime Minister Hun Sen's regime has recently adopted new repressive technologies—including an internet firewall inspired by similar technology in China—claiming the technology is useful for combating pandemic-related disinformation and potential rebellion.³⁸ Chinese trolls were found spreading messages in favor of the decision made by Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte's government to buy the Chinese-made Sinovac vaccine.³⁹

For many African CSOs, the priority is simply getting jabs into arms. Many of these CSOs have called for the removal of intellectual property rights on vaccines to facilitate this goal, calling specifically on G20 countries to support the move. The hashtag #NoCOVIDMonopolies has become a popular slogan in African civil society.⁴⁰ CSOs in Malawi launched a Vaccinate Our World campaign, which directs anger at the limited reach of COVAX, the global multilateral drive to broaden vaccine access.⁴¹ The main call from CSOs in Africa is for more vaccine accessibility for less wealthy countries.

With CSOs aiming their fire at Western countries for hoarding vaccines, this has made many of these organizations more receptive to Chinese and Russian pledges to make vaccines available.⁴² In Kenya, for example, public opinion has become more critical of the West and more positive toward Russia, which supplied the Sputnik V vaccine at affordable prices.⁴³ An alliance of sixty-three CSOs in Africa has run a campaign pushing rich nations to agree to suspend the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights.⁴⁴

Following this theme, Indian CSOs have supported cooperation with Russia in its rollout of Sputnik V. The groups are most concerned about vaccine equity and accessibility rather than which vaccine is procured. Indian rights-based groups have demanded free vaccination and equal treatment for all citizens, criticizing the government's vaccine nationalism as it has become clear that its boast that India would become the “pharmacy of the world” has imposed a tragic cost on the local population's ability to access vaccines.⁴⁵

The main call from CSOs in Africa is for more vaccine accessibility for less wealthy countries.

Across Latin America, China and Russia moved to provide medical equipment, donations, and vaccinations more quickly than the United States or EU, and experts assert that this contrast has had an impact on these countries' societal views and by association their political values.⁴⁶ This trend has even seeped into European civil society: a survey found that a majority of Czechs thought that China did more to help their country during the pandemic than the EU, and this perception has deepened polarization within society over the country's geopolitical positioning.⁴⁷ Similar divisions have intensified in Slovakia around Sputnik V and its associated geopolitical ramifications.⁴⁸ And similar dynamics have created stiffer headwinds for European civil society cooperation in the Balkans.⁴⁹

In the Middle East, Egypt and Morocco have begun to manufacture the Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines, respectively.⁵⁰ Western governments' decisions to bar the entry of millions of citizens from countries with new coronavirus variants have created significant mistrust among civil society actors. This trend has had a destructive effect on conflict contexts, where COVAX has been hampered by a lack of supplies from Western democracies, again forcing reliance on Russia and China. This dynamic in turn is weakening Western leverage in places like Libya, Syria, and Yemen. CSOs in the region were especially critical of Israel's attacks in Gaza and of Israel's refusal to provide vaccines to the Palestinian population—actions they see as occurring with the West's forbearance.⁵¹ The vaccine diplomacy that continues to propel China and Russia's engagement with Arab countries is also giving the two countries wider influence for the post-pandemic period.

If these trends have uncomfortable implications for the future of democratic geopolitics, an inverse trend has also taken root. That is, in some countries, activists have taken a harder stance against Chinese and Russian actions and by association against the authoritarian trends that the pandemic has intensified.

In Taiwan, the country's remarkable success in containing the coronavirus has given a fillip to civic democracy agendas. For Taiwan's advocacy groups, the global health crisis has showed it was even more important to prioritize the values of social solidarity, labor protections, and human rights. Since Taiwan's government largely has been able to minimize the contagion by collecting citizens' data including travel history, occupations, and contact histories, grave concerns have emerged over the data's potential misuse, which could lead to violations of privacy protections. The Taiwan Association for Human Rights has played the leading role in a campaign to demand clearer legal authorization and proper protections for such personal data.⁵² Here, mounting concerns about China have sharpened civic activists' focus on democracy and human rights.

Debates sharpened in the spring of 2021 as an unexpected outbreak put Taiwan into a semi-lockdown emergency, and an acute shortage of vaccines began to cause concerns. Many Taiwanese citizens were unwilling to take AstraZeneca vaccines.⁵³ Opposition politicians pushed for the import of Chinese vaccines. The government's attempt to purchase vaccines produced by the Germany-based company BioNTech was frustrated because a Shanghai-based company claimed to have signed an exclusive contract for vaccine distribution in the

greater China area, which it argued included Taiwan.⁵⁴ In June 2021, the United States decided to intervene by freely giving Taiwan 2.5 million doses.⁵⁵ Clearly, Taiwan's vaccine politics showcased geopolitical factors at play. As China intended to exploit Taiwan's health emergency, Taiwan's international allies stepped in to forestall the coercive attempt from China.

In Brazil, the decision of Sao Paulo's governor to collaborate with the Chinese government on the production of vaccines triggered a conflict with the Bolsonaro government.⁵⁶ In many countries, civic initiatives related to vaccines have offered democratic potential. New Zealand has allocated a sizable share of its aid to Fiji in support of vaccination efforts to CSOs to help reach local communities.⁵⁷ The World Health Organization has opened an initiative for CSOs in Europe to increase vaccination uptake, fostering local democratic capacities.⁵⁸ The World Bank is funding digital technology initiatives through CSOs to widen outreach on the health emergency and vaccination information in particular.⁵⁹ The South African government has partnered with CSOs with the aim of getting their help to spread accurate COVID-19 vaccine information and to compel citizens to change their behavior according to best public health practices.⁶⁰ Such examples show how pandemic geopolitics are intensifying investments in pro-democracy civic capacities and democracies' societal resilience. Pandemic-era geopolitics are beginning to condition many states' domestic politics, pushing and pulling global civic activism in contrasting directions.

In many countries, civic initiatives related to vaccines have offered democratic potential.

Conclusion

While civil society actors are still engaged intensely in the crisis period of the pandemic, they have now begun to move debates into a new stage that is focused on longer-term changes. These debates are still exploratory and tentative in most cases, and civic activists still need to plan for the long haul and lift their heads beyond the immediate health emergency. Civic leaders have talked about the need to permanently reshape civic agendas, and many organizations are beginning to fashion new economic, political, and international agendas. Yet for now it is not clear whether these steps are ambitious enough to extend toward a far-reaching rethink of economic and political models.

The different strands of civic rethinking still need to dovetail with each other in a more seamless fashion. CSOs will face the challenge of striking a balance between health-related activism and more political agendas. Civil society actors are now focusing more tightly than before on boosting their legitimacy with local communities. They have for many years been

aware of the need to do this, and during the 2010s, many groups developed new plans that attempted to do so. But the pandemic has pushed them far more decisively along this path of reform. This means that, well beyond issues pertaining to the health emergency itself, many civic actors are poised to come out of the pandemic with a renewed and more rooted sense of social support and credibility. This ethos is set to filter into a wider range of civic activism as the health crisis leads into other policy agendas.

If this is a broadly welcome and overdue shift, it also raises questions about how CSOs and social movements can engage with local concerns while also retaining a focus on more overarching political and human rights questions. As some governments attack rights-oriented CSOs, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to remain legitimate as service providers and human rights advocates at the same time. This will be a challenge not only for local civic strategies but also for international support for civil society. Some nondemocratic governments might be willing to accept certain relief efforts through CSOs only on the condition that these organizations are not vocal on human and civil rights abuses. The pandemic has shown that defending human rights and furthering relief efforts should not be treated separately in times of crisis. Coming out of the pandemic, international support will need to avoid these kinds of tensions between the coronavirus pandemic and broader political and economic agendas.

About the Carnegie Civic Research Network

Carnegie's Civic Research Network is a global group of leading experts and activists dedicated to examining the changing patterns of civic activism around the world and analyzing the implications for future international civil society support.

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