

## **CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER ASSAULT: REPRESSION AND RESPONSES IN RUSSIA, EGYPT, AND ETHIOPIA**

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The closing of civic space has become a defining feature of political life in an ever-increasing number of countries. Civil society organizations worldwide are facing systematic efforts to reduce their legitimacy and effectiveness. Russia, Egypt, and Ethiopia have been at the forefront of this global trend. In all three countries, governments' sweeping assault on associational life has forced civic groups to reorient their activities, seek out new funding sources, and move toward more resilient organizational models. Competing security and geopolitical interests have muddled U.S. and European responses, with governments divided over the value of aggressive pushback versus continued engagement.

### **The Closing Space Phenomenon**

Governments in Russia, Egypt, and Ethiopia have used a wide range of tactics to restrict civil society:

**Public vilification.** Governments rely on aggressive smear campaigns to discredit independent civil society groups, building on suspicions of foreign political meddling, fears of violent extremism, and anti-elite attitudes within society.

**Sweeping legal measures.** In addition to restrictive laws controlling nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), sweeping antiterror and antiprotest measures with vague legal definitions enable selective and unpredictable enforcement, which reinforces fear and self-censorship among activists.

**Civil society co-optation.** Governments purposefully sow divisions between apolitical and politically oriented organizations and selectively disburse rewards to co-opt civic actors and promote pro-government mobilization.

However, there are also differences among the three cases:

- In **Russia**, the government's efforts have centered on delegitimizing and restricting foreign-funded groups and promoting apolitical and pro-government organizations as socially useful. Authorities have primarily relied on smear campaigns, relentless administrative and legal harassment, and selective criminal prosecutions to weaken, marginalize, and intimidate independent groups.
- In **Egypt**, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime has used sweeping antiterrorism and antiprotest measures to institutionalize previously extrajudicial practices. Egyptian authorities have targeted human rights groups with travel bans, asset freezes, and legal harassment, while local development and civic initiatives struggle to access resources for their work. In parallel, the regime has escalated the use of enforced disappearances and detentions of activists, dissidents, and suspected Muslim Brotherhood supporters.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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- In **Ethiopia**, authorities have pushed NGOs from rights-based efforts to service delivery activities and imposed onerous funding limitations. Targeted repression in the name of counterterrorism has further stifled civic activism, and the government is increasingly relying on emergency powers to suppress growing rural dissent.

## Consequences and Responses

- **Scaling back.** Government restrictions have not only weakened human rights groups: advocacy, service delivery, and capacity-building groups have also faced funding shortages, bureaucratic hurdles, and government interference, forcing them to cut back and reorient their work.
- **Diminished societal reach.** Smear campaigns and legal restrictions have undermined both horizontal ties among civic actors and vertical ties between activists and political elites, thereby reducing activists' ability to form coalitions and influence policy debates.
- **Search for alternative funding.** Funding restrictions have pushed groups to raise resources through crowdfunding, membership fees, and income-generating activities—often with limited success. Others have adapted by shifting their focus to less politically sensitive activities in order to qualify for foreign funding and government support.
- **Shift to new organizational models.** Complex registration, reporting, and audit requirements and the constant threat of legal challenges have spurred some activists to abandon the traditional NGO model in favor of nonregistered and informal initiatives.
- **Hesitant diplomatic pushback.** The competing security and geopolitical interests of Western governments vis-à-vis governments that restrict civil society have hindered coherent responses. As a result, civic space issues have frequently been sidelined at high-level meetings and decoupled from other areas of cooperation—resulting in incoherent messaging.
- **Tactical uncertainty.** U.S. and European governments have also faced internal divisions over the effectiveness of aggressive pushback and isolation versus continued engagement and behind-the-scenes pressure, with the latter resulting in limited tactical successes but no overall change in the closing space trend.

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