Global Civic Activism in Flux

Richard Youngs  Editor | Youssef Cherif, Hafsa Halawa, Vijayan MJ, Adams Oloo, Natalia Shapovalova, Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, Marisa von Bülow, and Özge Zihnioğlu

Civil society around the world is in flux. New forms of civic activism have taken shape, ranging from protest movements to community-level forums and online campaigns by individual activists. Debate is growing over how much these new, dynamic forms of civic activism are displacing the influence wielded by traditional, professional, advocacy-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Changes in Civil Society

This analysis charts how civic activism is evolving across eight countries:

- In Brazil, civic activism has taken on a range of innovative organizational forms, with many new initiatives focusing on local issues while others are caught up in the country’s deepening political polarization.
- In Egypt, the government’s assault on civil society has prompted a move away from traditional NGOs as activists seek less visible forms of volunteerism and civic organization.
- In India, new types of community-based activism have added dynamism to campaigns against economic inequalities, social injustice, and the illiberal policies of the current government.
- In Kenya, activism increasingly combines informal networks and formal organizations to some effect, and these activists have in general distanced themselves from the political opposition.
- In Thailand, civil society is divided between two competing political camps, while new types of creative activism are emerging in opposition to the country’s military regime.
- In Tunisia, civic activism has helped maintain the momentum of political reform; new types of more contentious activism have emerged to counter traditional NGOs’ alignment with the country’s relatively consensus-based and now faltering transition.
- In Turkey, the 2013 Gezi protests led to the creation of new community organizations as alternatives to formal NGOs; the government’s current assault on civil society is a serious challenge that compounds the shift toward nonpolitical and local forms of activism.
- In Ukraine, a new spirit of volunteerism has grown since the 2014 Euromaidan revolt, while many prominent new activists have moved toward cooperating with the government.

About the Contributors

Richard Youngs is a senior fellow in the Democracy and Rule of Law Program at Carnegie Europe and a professor of international relations at the University of Warwick.

Youssef Cherif is a political analyst on North Africa and the deputy director of Columbia Global Centers in Tunisia.

Hafsa Halawa is a British-Egyptian political analyst, human rights advocate, and development specialist focused on democratic transition across Arab states.

Vijayan MJ is an activist and analyst based in New Delhi, India.

Adams Oloo is a senior lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Nairobi in Kenya.

Natalia Shapovalova is a researcher based in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Political Science at Thammasat University in Thailand.

Marisa von Bülow is a professor at the Political Science Institute of the University of Brasilia, Brazil.

Özge Zihnioğlu is an assistant professor of international relations at Istanbul Kültür University in Turkey.
While there is a global wave of new protests and innovative citizen movements, many civic struggles are increasingly rooted in specific national issues.

New and older forms of civic activism coexist and intertwine in a variety of ways.

Some new activism is highly political and confrontational; some is very practical and pragmatic about trying to circumvent the shortcomings of mainstream politics.

New civic activism includes groups espousing an increasingly wide range of ideological positions.

While the new activism has been effective on some specific issues, it is mostly struggling to hold at bay resurgent authoritarian and illiberal government responses.