Working with Civil Society in Authoritarian Contexts? The Case of Niger

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The recent wave of coups in the Sahel puts Western policy makers in a difficult situation: While they wish to maintain relations and vie for influence, they also want to avoid strengthening unconstitutional rule. Collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) who are supposedly closer to citizens, is currently discussed as a way out of the dilemma. However, research on civil society and foreign aid in Africa reveals that especially in authoritarian contexts, the lines between CSOs and the state are often blurred. The example of Niger shows that civil society is highly politicised. Its relationship with the state is dynamic and rapidly changing. If Western policy makers wish to collaborate with CSOs, they need to have up-to-date knowledge about local CSO landscapes, flexible funding instruments, and a clearly defined strategy that entails risk mitigation measures while embedding CSO support in a concerted political approach.

Western states' responses to the recent wave of coup d'états in the Sahel region have been diverse. Within the European Union and its Member States, finding a common stance vis-à-vis the new military regimes has been hampered by conflicts of interest. Some take a hard line and reject collaborating with unconstitutional regimes and their populations altogether.[1] Others argue that in light of European security and migration-related interests, geopolitical competition with Russia, or support to vulnerable populations, donors should maintain some type of engagement. Against this backdrop, the idea to enhance engagement with civil society in the Sahel has been promoted as a viable strategy to support domestic actors without contributing to the consolidation of authoritarian rule.

Regarding Niger, for example, Germany has suspended all bilateral development projects following the coup d'état in July 2023.[2] In the latest negotiations in 2021, Germany pledged to provide 120 million EUR for bilateral development assistance that was supposed to be spent over two years. Following the coup, 24 million EUR that was ready for disbursement was frozen. Instead, additional means of 8 million EUR were provided in 2023 to new projects with CSOs. This means that in 2023, roughly 30 million EUR was projected to be spent on CSOs alone. These funds go to German or international CSOs or go through German implementation organizations, who work directly with local partners. Funded projects are

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[1] Denis Tull, "Wie weiter in der Sahelpolitik?,". *SWP-Aktuell*, no. 19 (March 2024).
[2] Except for projects that are categorized as crisis instruments.

meant to support vulnerable populations and local structures, making them more resilient for future crises, such as by promoting climate resilient agriculture and the right to reproductive health and education.[3] These projects build on a tradition of collaborating with CSOs in their capacity as service providers. Supporting CSOs as advocates for democracy, human rights, and accountability has been of lesser concern. In the past five years, only one small project (167,000 EUR) was tagged as having democratic participation and civil society promotion as its main goal.[4]

The approach of circumventing the national government in international cooperation has been controversially debated. German opposition parties[5] and the media[6] have questioned the assumption that it is possible to evade national politics in Niger by collaborating with local civil society. The understandable desire to remain engaged and not leave vulnerable populations behind, albeit without strengthening unconstitutional regimes, presupposes that CSOs operate independently of politics.

The aim of this policy brief is to add clarity to the debate, by presenting evidence from the rich body of academic literature on the relationship between international donors, civil society, and the state in Africa, with a particular focus on authoritarian contexts. In a second step, this policy brief traces the evolution of civil society in Niger to illustrate the fluidity between civil society actors and the military-political sphere that renders partnerships with CSOs inherently unpredictable. The paper concludes that donors intending to collaborate with CSOs in authoritarian contexts such as Niger need to recognize the political nature of civil society and define intervention strategies that identify and mitigate the risks of harming democracy and human rights.

Why Donors Fund CSOs in Africa

Civil society is an elusive concept that generally refers to the intermediary sphere between family, state, and the market.[7] Since the end of the Cold War, western donors started to channel increasing amounts of aid through CSOs in Africa, thereby promoting the proliferation of such organizations. CSOs were expected to advance liberal values,[8] such as promoting good governance and democratisation, yet were also seen as more effective service implementers compared with state institutions to reach local communities, particularly in contexts of state fragility.

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[3] "Reaktion auf den Putsch. Deutschland setzt in Niger verstärkt auf Nichtregierungsorganisationen,". *Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung,* 17 October 2023, accessed 8 October 2024.

[4] According to the transparency portal of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development: https://www.transparenzportal.bund.de/

[5] Deutscher Bundestag, *Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Sevim Dağdelen, Dr. Sahra Wagenknecht, Ali Al-Dailami, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Gruppe BSW* – Drucksache 20/12302 –(Deutscher Bundestag: Aug 8, 2024), Drucksache 20/12569, accessed 8 October 2024.

[6] Ines Trams, "Sahel-Allianz tagt in Berlin. Dilemma: Wie umgehen mit Putsch-Staaten?," *ZDF heute*, 16 July 2024, accessed 8 October 2024.

[7] Palash Kamruzzaman, "*Introduction – Civil Society in the Global South,*" in *Civil Society in the Global South*, ed. Palash Kamruzzaman (London: Routledge, 2018), 1-24.

[8] In their strategy for collaboration with civil society, the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development makes explicit that they only seek collaboration with CSOs that defend human rights, democracy, and gender equality. For an in-depth discussion of the concept of civil society in African contexts, see: David Lewis, "Civil Society in African Contexts: Reflections on the Usefulness of a Concept," *Development and Change* 33, no. 4 (2002): 569-586.

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> Infobox 1: Definition of CSOs
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> In this policy brief, we adopt the definition of CSOs provided by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED): "CSOs can be defined to include all non-market and non-state organizations outside of the family in which people organise themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain. They cover a wide range of organisations that include membership-based CSOs, cause-based CSOs and service-oriented CSOs. Examples include community-based organizations and village associations, environmental groups, women's rights groups, farmers' associations, faith-based organizations, labour unions, co-operatives, professional associations, chambers of commerce, independent research institutes and the not-for profit media."[9]

Funding for CSOs rests on strong normative assumptions. A vibrant civil society is considered as a prerequisite for peaceful and stable democratic societies. CSOs are seen as essential for representing different societal groups, balancing out opposing interests. In their political role, CSOs are expected to hold state actors accountable, to encourage the emergence of responsive, inclusive, and legitimate state institutions. As service deliverers, CSOs are sought to complement state activities in the field of socio-economic development and welfare, and to promote citizens' rights to certain services, thereby contributing indirectly to democratisation and stabilisation.[10] However, empirical research on civil society and foreign aid in Africa challenges these normative assumptions about civil society's role.

First, contrary to donors' expectations, CSOs neither necessarily pursue democratic goals nor are they internally democratically organised or non-partisan. For instance, faith-based organizations or hometown associations that are very popular in Africa might pursue exclusionist goals, despite their high relevance for their members' welfare.

Second, regardless of CSOs' stated values or political stance, their position is always political in the sense that their activities include certain constituencies while excluding others. Many, in fact, emulate prevailing socio-cultural norms of patron-clientelism that are more widely found in society. Even if CSOs act as supposedly neutral service providers in health or education, the selection of their beneficiaries might be in accordance with ethnic or partisan lines. In many settings, CSOs are important political players in communities, alongside other non-state actors, such as traditional authorities or local community leaders, as they bring resources to the areas in which they operate. This is especially relevant when state institutions are absent or malfunctioning. In addition, the distinction between service-delivery and political activities is not always clear-cut. Organizations might be active in both fields and rely, for example, on the distribution of humanitarian and development aid to serve their constituents. Or, they may use more easily accessible grants dedicated to service delivery activities to cross-finance their political activities. Especially in authoritarian contexts that do not allow for open political activities, CSOs rely on service-delivery activities to secure their own survival.

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[9] OECD, *How DAC members work with civil society organisations: An overview 2011*, (Paris: OECD, 2011), accessed 8 October, 2024.
[10] Carothers distinguishes between political and developmental democracy assistance: Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Assistance: Political vs. Development?," *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 1 (2009): 5-19.

> **Infobox 2: Are CSOs Effective in Supporting Democratisation Processes?**
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> Quantitative and qualitative evidence on CSOs' influence on democratisation processes are scarce. In a meta study on aid and democracy, 81% of the reviewed studies that discussed targeted democracy aid found a positive impact on democratic outcomes, whereas for general aid only 61% of the studies showed a positive effect.[11] As the literature on democracy aid does not distinguish between the specific effects of support for elections, institutions, or support to CSOs, it is not clear how effective support to CSOs is in and of itself. Quantitative studies about this are scarce. A study conducted in 2008 based on OECD data found that aid channelled through NGOs does not have any measurable effect on the democracy level of a country.[12] A study based on an analysis of US foreign assistance between 1990 and 2003 found the contrary.[13] How CSOs contribute to democratisation processes is very much context-dependent: While CSOs played an important role in the democratic transitions and democratic consolidation in a number of Latin American countries in the 1970s and 1980s,[14] the transition to multi-partyism in many African countries after the Cold War were based on much broader societal coalitions.[15] The Arab Spring was initiated by social movements, whereas professional CSOs joined the struggle later. Hence, donor-funded CSOs can complement democratisation processes, but are not necessarily the driving force. In many African countries, membership-based CSOs, such as labour unions or student organisations, played a major part in the third wave of democratisation in the early 1990s.

Third, the normative assumptions underpinning civil society funding make donors collaborate with only a small sub-set of CSOs, namely those that use the same development and humanitarian terminology as donors and that have the administrative capacities to apply for funding. This is exacerbated by extensive management and accountability requirements donors place on CSOs that have contributed to a professionalisation of the sector, favouring larger, elite-based organizations over membership-based (e.g., trade unions) or grassroots organizations (e.g., community-based organizations). While membership-based organizations might promote parochial agendas which are not in line with donors' values, grassroots organizations often do not meet minimum requirements for receiving funding, such as being registered or having a physical office (ideally in the capital city), or a bank account. Professional organizations, however, tend to work more on service delivery, prioritizing donors' objectives to access funding, and might reproduce elites' interests instead of challenging them. They might also compete with the state over resources, undermining the state's capacity in the long run.

[11] Rachel Gisselquist, Miguel Nino-Zarazua, and Melissa Samarin, *Does Aid Support Democracy: A systematic review of the literature* (WIDER, 2021), WIDER Working Paper 2021/14, accessed 8 October 2024.

[12] Richard Nielsen and Daniel Nielson. "Lending Democracy: How Governance Aid May Affect Freedom," (conference paper, 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston. Aug 28-31, 2008).

[13] Steven E. Finkel et al., "The Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building, 1990–2003", *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 404-440

[14] Claire Mercer, "NGOs, civil society and democratization: a critical review of the literature." *Progress in Development Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 5-22.

[15] Michael Bratton and Nicolas Van de Walle, *Democratic experiments in Africa: Regime transitions in comparative perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

This has two important implications. On the one hand, the incentive structure created through foreign funding can come at the expense of the political functions of CSOs and contribute to depoliticizing their agendas. On the other hand, professional CSOs often enjoy less legitimacy with local populations than those who represent members' interests. A lack of legitimacy may thereby also play into the hands of authoritarian regimes who often dismiss donor-funded CSOs as foreign agents and restrict an influx of foreign funding.

Civil Society and the State in Authoritarian Contexts

For CSOs to assume a watchdog role, as presumed by western donors, they need to be able to act to a certain degree autonomously from the state. However, in reality, lines between the state and CSOs are not always clear cut.[16] Civil society and the state are rather mutually constitutive than completely independent and do not necessarily have to be in opposition: agendas can be converging or overlapping, CSOs can be voluntarily or involuntary co-opted by the state, or CSOs can even be established by the state.[17] As the existence of CSOs depends on the rules and regulations of the state, their output may contribute to legitimizing the incumbent regime.

Relations between CSOs and the state are thereby not static, but are subject to change. In line with the global trend towards autocratization, civic space is increasingly shrinking. Between 1990 and 2018, at least 90 countries worldwide adopted restrictive CSO regulations.[18] Restrictions placed on CSOs and the media are known to be the first steps in the sequence of autocratization, acting as an early warning sign before formal institutions are captured. Such restrictions can be imposed through legal and extra-legal means and for various reasons. A common restriction that concerns international donors is to constrain foreign funding to CSOs in the context of a wider normative debate on national sovereignty and the right to self-determination. Against the background of global power asymmetries, post-colonial legacies and anti-western sentiments, the one-directional flow of funds to CSOs is increasingly seen as critical by states in the Global South.

Restrictions that pertain to the domestic operations of CSOs include, for instance, the curtailing of citizen's freedom of assembly under the pretext of preventing organizations from inciting violence or calling for an overthrow of the constitutional order. Other common restrictions against CSOs include physical harassment and intimidation of staff, criminalisation, administrative restrictions, stigmatization, and a reduction in the space for dialogue.[19] These restrictions do not concern all CSOs alike. Civic space can therefore be characterised as shifting, instead of narrowing. Authoritarian regimes mostly curtail the operations of CSOs that focus on issues such as human rights, social and environmental justice, gender, or democratization, which are not only politically sensitive, but also often associated with western liberal values.[20] At the same time, these governments often build relationships with

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[16] David Lewis, Nazneen Kanji, and Nuno S. Themudo, *Non-Governmental Organizations and Development* (London: Routledge, 2021), 128.

[17] Jasmin Lorch and Bettina Bunk, "Using Civil Society as an Authoritarian Legitimation Strategy: Algeria and Mozambique in Comparative Perspective," *Democratization* 24, no. 6 (2017): 987-1005.

[18] Kendra Dupuy, Luc Fransen, and Aseem Prakash, "Restricting NGOs: From Pushback to Accommodation," *Global Policy* 12, suppl. 5 (2021): 5-10.

[19] Chris Van der Borgh and Carolijn Terwindt, *NGOs Under Pressure in Partial Democracies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[20] Stefan Toepler et al., "The Changing Space for NGOs: Civil Society in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 31 (2020): 649-662.; Helmut Anheier, Markus Lang, and Stefan Toepler, "Civil society in times of change: shrinking, changing and expanding spaces and the

CSOs that provide services or act more generally in line with the regime's interests. Hence, most contemporary authoritarian states do formally allow autonomous organizations to exist and operate. Authoritarian states thereby assign CSOs specific roles that contribute to furthering the regimes' output legitimacy and even promote their legitimacy vis-à-vis international donors. Regimes may also rely on service-providing CSOs to acquire information about social needs and ways to appease populations without politicizing their demands. For this purpose, they might even establish government-organised non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). Regimes also rely on CSOs to mobilize followers. However, this convening power is potentially ambiguous, as it could be used at any moment against the regime in place.

CSOs adjust their strategies when faced with restrictions: Some openly protest or take legal measures, while others change their focus from advocacy to service delivery, disrupt their international ties, or disband. Organizations which continue operations often find ways to circumvent restrictions by changing their language, self-censoring, downsizing, relying more on volunteers, or changing their funding sources. Other strategies include diversification (e.g., changing parts of the activities to for-profit to be able to register), moving activities abroad or online, or informalisation (they officially disband, but continue informally).[21]

If states simultaneously seek out strategic partnerships with CSOs for service delivery, while at the same time restrict political activities, CSOs might be able to harness new opportunities for funding and exert indirect influence, emulating the western model of collaborative governance. However, they might also end up co-opted for regime propaganda. This puts donors in a potentially difficult position, as these state-aligned CSOs might still support donors' development agendas, even if they endorse non-democratic goals. They might also be the most experienced and reliable partners.[22]

Civil Society and the State in Niger: An Ambivalent Relationship

Niger aptly illustrates the fluidity of civil society actors in their relation to international partners and the state. Having played a decisive role in opening the public space since the country's democratization process in the early 1990s, Niger's civil society has been steadily growing ever since. Pursuing interests ranging from parochial to macrosocial levels, civil society has contributed to the resolution of social and political conflicts, the defence of human rights, or the fight against corruption. Engaged in humanitarian and development aid, CSOs have also been crucial in reaching out to vulnerable populations. Amongst its biggest achievements was in 2005 with the successful struggle of the "Coalition against the high cost of living", an alliance of over 30 CSOs to oppose the government's bill to increase the taxation of essential goods.[23] Headed by former leaders of the student movement, which had helped put an end to military dictatorship, the coalition managed to mobilize large segments of the population and put pressure on the government, who finally abandoned its initial plan.

need for new regulatory approaches." *Economics: The OpenAccess, Open-Assessment E-Journal* 13, no. 1 (2019): 1-27.

[21] Toepler et al., "The Changing Space for NGOs: Civil Society in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes."

[22] David Lewis, "Civil Society and the Authoritarian State: Cooperation, Contestation and Discourse." *Journal of Civil Society* 9, no. 3 (2013): 325-340.

[23] Vincent Bonnecase, "Democracy and Adjustment in Niger: A Conflict of Rationales," *International Review of Social History*, 66 (2021): 181-214.

Proliferation of Actors and Shifting Alliances

Over the past two decades, the role of civil society in Niger has become increasingly ambiguous and contested. Two trends illustrate both shifting agendas and blurred lines between CSOs and the political sphere.

First, the range of actors considering themselves as part of the country's civil society has significantly widened. Amongst the new players are organizations that have emerged in the context of international cooperation, serving as interlocutors between donors and recipients of development aid, but also as local agents to promote the activities of multinational enterprises, e.g., mining companies.

Furthermore, individual actors defining themselves as whistle-blowers, activists, bloggers, or influencers have mushroomed in the context of digitalisation and the creation of virtual public spaces, shaping public opinion from within and outside the country.[24] What these different actors have in common, is strong personalization. Organizations not only identify with their leaders, who are usually better known than the organizations themselves, but often only exist through their leaders.[25] These individuals might not necessarily represent members' interests, but they are often able to leverage political power.

Second, civil society in Niger has become increasingly entangled with the political sphere. CSOs have not only begun to build alliances with political parties, the government, or the military, but have also started to be directly involved in exercising political power. A turning point in this regard was in 2009, when a coalition of CSOs and political opposition parties, the "Coordination des forces pour la démocratie et la République (CFDR)", rallied against President Mamadou Tandja's *Tazarché* (continuity), i.e., his attempt to stay in power beyond the term limits set by the constitution.[26] When President Tandja was finally overthrown by a coup d'état in February 2010, the new military leaders included civil society in the administration of the transition period. By appointing Marou Amadou as president of the "Conseil Consultatif National" (NCC), one of the most iconic civil society actors and critics of Tandja became the president of the parliament.

With the return to democratic order, the amalgam of civil society with formal politics continued. After the presidential elections in 2011, newly elected President Mahamadou Issoufou named, for example, Marou Amadou the Minister of Justice as part of his strategy to co-opt any possible political opposition.[27] At the same time, Issoufou's harsh repression against the opposition politicised civil society in Niger even more. With opposition leaders such as Issoufou's prominent challenger Hama Amadou from the Moden/FA Lumana Africa party being imprisoned and forced into exile, civil society not only became the most important public realm for political contestation, but also an arena of action for marginalised opposition leaders.[28] As a result, the lines between civil society and party politics became increasingly blurred. Reacting to this development, Issoufou took a hard line against civil society, publicly denouncing organizations critical of the government as "putschists"[29] or

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[24] Garba Abdou Azizou, "Niger: la société civile contre la démocratie?", *CETRI Le Sud en Mouvement*, 28 March 2024, accessed 9 October 2024.

[25] Philippe *Lavigne Delville. Aide internationale et sociétés civiles au Niger (Paris/Montpellier/Marseille: Karthala/ APAD/IRD, 2015)*, 32-37.

[26] Azizou, "Niger: la société civile contre la démocratie?"

[27] Thibault Van Damme, *Under the shadow of Boko Haram: Niger on the eve of elections* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2016), accessed 4 October 2024.

[28] Klaas van Walraven, "Niger," in *Africa Year Book Volume 15. Politics, Economy and Society South of the Sahara in 2018*, ed. Seidu M. Alidu, Benedikt Kamski, Andreas Mehler, and David Sebudubudu (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 134-135.

[29] Christophe Châtelot, "Au Niger, la démocratie « selon Issoufou » se passe de la société civile." *Le Monde*, 7 June 2018, accessed 9 October 2024.

allies of "terrorists".[30] Both during the presidency of Issoufou (2011-2021) and of his successor Mohamed Bazoum (2021-2023), leading civil society actors faced severe repression.

The expansion of civil society's actor landscape as well as increased engagement within the formal political sphere have damaged civil society's reputation. While many Nigeriens consider CSOs as opportunistic and opaque money-making machines, lacking a committed and civic-minded vision, others denounce civil society as a platform for political manoeuvres of its leaders and the opposition. Even within civil society, these different notions are reproduced and used as means of demarcation.

Civil Society against Democracy?

The July 2023 coup, which overthrew President Bazoum, has deepened the trenches between those who see CSOs as commercial businesses and those who denounce them as political entrepreneurs. What is apparent, is that the quickly changing political environment has provided a window of opportunity for politically marginalised actors, leading to a circumstantial alliance of a number of CSOs with the new military regime. Not only does this illustrate that CSOs are not necessarily pro-democratic forces, but that their political allegiances can also shift.

CSOs successfully mobilised the population in support of the junta, building on grievances regarding the inadequate performance of the ousted government as well as intervention plans announced by the regional organization the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) following the coup. The M62 movement, created in August 2022 as a coalition of 15 CSOs to oppose the presence of foreign military in Niger and comprised of organizations supported extensively by international donors in the past, was one of the driving forces.[31] Abdoulaye Seydou, leader of the M62 movement, who had been sentenced to prison for the "production and dissemination of data likely to disturb public order"[32] prior to the coup, was released shortly after the coup. On the other hand, even the junta has, despite strong support from parts of civil society, joined in complaints about the profit-oriented character of CSOs, who, according to the narrative, fail to produce results on the ground.[33]

What seems striking nowadays, compared to the coup d'état in 2010, is that even CSOs who were before engaged at the forefront in the fight for democratic change, do not seem at all to be in a hurry to restore constitutional order. Interviews with leading civil society actors conducted in Niamey shortly after the coup reveal three explanations for this remarkable turn:

First and foremost, high levels of repression have silenced parts of civil society that are critical of the new regime. The denunciation of dissidents as "unpatriotic", paired with increased state surveillance and countless extra-juridical arrests have created a climate of fear, which paralyses any open urge for pro-democratic claims. At the same time, democratically-oriented civil society actors are trying to come to terms with the new military government in order to be able to continue their work and access funding.

[30] François de Labarre, "Au Niger, le régime de Madamadou Issoufou pointé du doigt." *Paris Match*, May 28, 2018, accessed Oct 9, 2024; Nadia Chahed, "Niamey renforcera les alliances avec les forces étrangères (président nigérien)." *Agence Anadolu*, 18 December 2019, accessed 9 October 2024.

[31] "Coup d'Etat au Niger : M62, le Mouvement nigérien appelant à l'expulsion des forces françaises," editorial, *BBC News Afrique*, 16 August 2023, accessed 9 October 2024.

[32] "Niger : Condamnation d'Abdoulaye Seydou." *Fédération internationale pour les droits humains (fidh),* 20 April *2023,* accessed 4 October 2024.

[33] Azizou, "Niger: la société civile contre la démocratie?"

A second crucial factor is the disappointment of civil society actors with the realities of liberal democracy in the country, which in the view of many favoured the emergence of a corrupt political class neither capable nor willing of providing development and security. Many in civil society hope that the coup would lead to a real refoundation of the state, eventually improving the daily lives of the population, even if this required time and non-democratic measures. By adopting a sovereigntist discourse, ending the military cooperation with France or denouncing the contracts with foreign mining companies – long condemned by leading CSOs as betraying the interests of the country – the junta moreover accommodated some of the main demands of Niger's civil society, thereby strengthening the belief in political change through the coup.

In view of the high politicization of civil society, a third explanation points to the personal and political aspirations of leading civil society actors as well as members of the former political opposition to the ousted Bazoum government, some of whom are said to collaborate with the junta and work towards a (post-)transition state in which they would be able to take "their turn in office". The opportunity to gain access to power in the course of the coup-related political upheavals thereby seems more important than the return to democratic order.

Especially Hama Amadou, who shortly after the coup returned to Niger, is accused of pursuing his own hidden agenda to re-enter the political arena.[34] Engaging, as some presume, in favour of a shift of power within the junta, he is suspected of collaborating with certain civil society actors to side-line the influence of coup-leader General Tiani and his patron, the former President Issoufou, as a means to strengthen the power of the political-military elite from the western parts of the country.

This shows that CSOs in Niger are currently not only ranking among the fiercest supporters of the junta, but at the same time represent a significant threat for its present leadership. If expectations and aspirations are not met or influence campaigns fail, endorsement for the new authorities could fade and mobilization dynamics could shift, without necessarily paving the way for a democratic renewal.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

Collaboration with CSOs in authoritarian settings, and especially in volatile or transition contexts, comes with risks for western governments. Civil society can be a pro-democracy force, but it can also act as a mobiliser for unconstitutional regimes. CSOs reflect the heterogeneity of the society they are part of as well as the spectrum of political attitudes. Especially in authoritarian and volatile contexts, allegiances are fluid. As the example of civil society in Niger illustrates, even (previously) pro-democratic civil society actors are not necessarily opposing the junta at this point, be that due to repression, lingering hopes that the new regime will improve living conditions, or out of political and personal calculations.

Due to the scarce resources of states, donor money can become an ever more important political bargaining chip that may strengthen the regime's output legitimacy and influence local political arenas. Donor projects can be used as patronage sources and are always political as not everyone benefits equally. In addition, even supposedly apolitical development CSOs cannot escape positioning themselves vis-à-vis the regime and must deal with

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[34] Rahmane Idrissa, "Fascism much? Ou chronique du règne de l'Absurde," *La Gazette Perpendiculaire* (blog), 29 January 2024, accessed 4 October 2024.

Working with Civil Society in Authoritarian Contexts? The Case of Niger

10

increasing repression. The opacity and volatility of shifting allegiances makes it hard for western donors to know who their civil society partners exactly are.

At the same time, CSOs are crucial in supporting vulnerable populations. Niger is a country that is highly dependent on aid, in which the retreat of western donors is likely going to exacerbate poverty levels. Donors should therefore embrace the political nature of CSO partnerships, regardless of whether they work with CSOs with the aim of supporting democracy or service delivery. To avoid strengthening authoritarian rule and harming human rights, policy makers might consider the following measures:

1. **Investing in in-depth and up-to-date knowledge about local CSO landscapes**. Donors should regularly carry out actor mappings to assess the sources and levels of legitimacy of organizations. Organizations based in their respective countries are best placed to follow up on recent developments. CSOs are not politically neutral - their allegiances and legitimacy can shift in volatile political situations. By understanding the political context and knowing the position of their partners, donors can leverage political interests and incentives for change. Ideally, CSO funding should be based on long-term relationships of trust with local partners.

2. **Developing a strategy to implement effective activities and mitigate risks.** Learning from past experiences, donors need to be much more explicit about what short-term and long-term goals they wish to pursue by funding CSOs. They should also be explicit about their own assumptions when working with CSOs.

   If funding is supposed to support vulnerable populations, it can be effective in the short run, as CSOs often have better access to vulnerable communities than state institutions. However, funding CSOs as service providers also inevitably enhances the regime's output legitimacy. Donors should identify the potential risks their interventions entail for stabilizing unconstitutional regimes and thereby harming democracy and come up with risk mitigation measures (i.e., "do no democratic harm"). This can also mean not engaging in certain cases. At the same time, service-delivery projects should be used as an entry point to foster civic values by supporting citizens to coordinate, participate, and demand accountability in specific sectors.

   If funding is supposed to support democratization, activities need to be in line with the political realities on the ground. While projects that openly pursue democratization as a goal might not be feasible, projects that provide spaces for actors to convene, exchange, and continue collaborating might still be possible. Maintaining relationships is crucial to be able to act if opportunities for re-democratization arise. Short-term and emergency funding that relies on less bureaucratic approval processes can be used to support and protect pro-democracy activists and can help CSOs under threat to adapt. For instance, emergency funds can help if organizations' assets are frozen or if activists need quick legal support. Once the situation allows for more sensitive political activities, funding should be in line with domestic CSOs' advocacy priorities, making sure that organisations can maintain their local legitimacy. Donors need to keep a low profile in their projects, not to put activists at risk. Funding also needs to be flexible enough for CSOs to adapt their strategies in line with the changing political environment and realities on the ground. Donors should thereby make sure to support broader coalitions of pro-democracy actors, going beyond professional development organizations.

3. **Complementing aid to CSOs with political and diplomatic efforts that address civic space restrictions.** Civic space restrictions are symptoms of progressing

autocratization, which western donors and governments need to address domestically as well as bi- and multilaterally, putting pressure on governments to initiate reforms. It is crucial to develop a holistic approach, addressing norms, legislation, and institutional strengthening alike to foster an enabling environment for civil society.
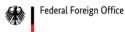
International advocacy and public appearances supporting local CSOs in defending civic space can make a difference in pushing back anti-CSO legislation.[35] Western partners should give pro-democracy activists a voice in international fora, making sure that it is not only the regime's narrative that is heard. They should also grant emergency visa and fellowships to protect pro-democracy and human rights activists who are at risk.

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[35] Nic Cheeseman and Susan Dodsworth. "Defending Civic Space: When Are Campaigns against Repressive Laws Successful?," *The Journal of Development Studies* 59, no. 5 (2023): 1-18.