

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unpacking ‘public silence’: Civil society activism under authoritarian rule in Ethiopia

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Abstract

How do civil society organisations (CSOs) and the state interact in non-democratic settings? Non-democratic regimes often meet civil society activism with repression, however, on an every-day basis contestation and control take more diverse forms. To capture how CSOs bargain with and contest state power, as well as how states police CSOs, this article draws on the case of Ethiopia (1991–2018). It analyses different types of interactions between service providing CSOs and state actors and studies when and how CSOs have been able to place their demands on state actors and when and to what extent their demands have been adhered to. Looking beyond the absence of public protests against the ruling government by CSOs, the article argues that CSOs, including those formally aligned to or co-opted by the regime, have been resourceful in devising strategies that promote the interests of their members and beneficiaries. Defying co-optation, they have constantly negotiated space through a combination of cooperation, coexistence and contestation.

KEYWORDS

authoritarian rule, civil society, civil Society–State relations, Ethiopia, NGO

1 | INTRODUCTION

How do civil society organisations (CSOs) and the state interact in non-democratic settings? Research on state-civil society relations has yet to develop a theory that can account for the complexity and variations of their relations and interactions in non-democratic settings.

In the 1990s, the “third wave of democratisation” (Huntington, 1993) sparked much enthusiasm about the potential of civil society to promote democracy. Drawing on Tocquevillian ideas, civil society was thought necessary for liberal democracy to emerge (Diamond, 1994; Gellner, 1994). Consequently, the relationship between CSOs and non-democratic regimes was conceptualised as antagonistic, with CSOs checking and balancing state power and

pushing for more accountable forms of governance. Research explored the possible causal link between civil society and democracy and tried to delineate the concept empirically, measuring and mapping the organisational density and diversity of civil society in different contexts (Anheier, 2004; Heinrich, 2005; Putnam, 1995). However, global democratic backsliding and the growing coexistence between CSOs and non-democratic governments have questioned the potential and willingness of civil society to bring about sustainable democratic transition (Cavatorta, 2013).

To understand why the presence of CSOs in many non-democratic settings has not led more systematically to democratisation, a growing canon of work has explored civil society activism under non-democratic rule. Research highlighted that non-democratic governments were able to control civil society and

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revealed the numerous ways in which governments ensured that CSOs abide by state imposed rules (Heurlin, 2010; Wiktorowicz, 2000). Existing CSOs were often portrayed as co-opted (Khatib, 2013; Rivetti, 2013). Particularly research focussing on advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) noted the shrinking of civic space available to them (Dupuy et al., 2015; Gordon, 2014). Furthermore, research found that service providing CSOs filled gaps where states were unable to reach, rendering non-democratic regimes at times more stable through alleviating grievances among the population (Hildebrandt, 2013; Teets, 2013). Finally, the civil character of CSOs has also been questioned, as some were found to advance particularistic agendas and failed to adhere to democratic principles (Jamal, 2009). Given the rare occurrence of open contestation by CSOs, studies often concluded that civil society in non-democratic settings was weak and unable to check and balance state power.

While state-centric analyses have emphasized the capacity of non-democratic regimes to control CSOs and suggested that civic space has been shrinking, a growing canon of critical work has pointed to the fact that civil society–state relations in non-democratic settings are dynamic (Toepler et al., 2020). Instead of simply shrinking, civic space has been characterised by both expansion and contraction, opening in certain regards, and for certain purposes and actors, while closing for others (Aasland et al., 2020; Moldavanova et al., 2023). Additionally, research has demonstrated that the division of CSOs into advocacy organisations trying to promote democracy and service providing NGOs inevitably stabilising non-democratic regimes is problematic. Instead, many service providing CSOs also conduct policy advocacy and contribute to democratising public spaces in non-democratic settings (Herrold & AbouAssi, 2023; Mati, 2020). Finally, research found that everyday resistance under non-democratic rule often takes the form of covert, rather than overt opposition (Pellerin, 2019a).

The article at hand contributes to rethinking civil society–state relations under non-democratic rule, unpacking, contesting and reframing the ‘silence’ of CSOs. It draws on a case study of service providing CSOs in Ethiopia, covering the period between 1991 and 2018,¹ during which the country was ruled by the Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (EPRDF).² The article argues that CSOs, including those formally aligned to or co-opted by the regime, were resourceful in devising strategies that promoted the interests of their members and beneficiaries. Defying co-optation, they constantly negotiated

space through a combination of cooperation, coexistence and contestation. To capture how CSOs bargain with and contest state power, this article analyses different types of interactions between CSOs and state actors. Breaking down the analysis of civil society–state relations to individual interactions, this article disaggregates the spheres of state and civil society and captures their heterogeneous character and relationships. It analyses when and how CSOs have been able to place their demands on the political agenda and when and to what extent their demands have been adhered to, asking: When have CSOs been able to push their agenda against the interest of the state (contestation)? When have they pursued their agenda without putting direct pressure on the state and operated at its distance (coexistence)? When have they cooperated with state actors to pursue their agenda (cooperation)? And when has their agenda become controlled by state actors (co-optation)?

The article proceeds as follows: The next section briefly presents the research design and methods. This is followed by the discussion of previous approaches to the study of civil society–state relations under non-democratic rule and a summary of the state of civil society in Ethiopia. The analysis is divided into a brief presentation of the analytical framework, followed by four sub-sections exploring the empirical manifestations of different types of interactions between civil society and state actors. The conclusion summarises the key findings and discusses implications for future research.

2 | METHODS

The article is based on 48 interviews with civil society activists, civil servants and experts in Ethiopia. Additionally, seven focus groups with members and beneficiaries of CSOs were held, and observations at CSO and government offices conducted. Civil society organisations interviewed worked on a broad range of issues, including education, girls' and women's empowerment, gender based violence, micro entrepreneurship and technical and vocational education training. The data was collected as part of a bigger research project on state–society relations in Ethiopia (Pellerin, 2019a). Fieldwork was conducted between October 2015 and October 2018 in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, as well as urban areas in two regional states, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region, amounting to 13 months of data collection. I also collected written documents, for example, legal and policy documents, reports, letters and personal communications. Research participants were selected through snowball sampling, using a variety of different referral chains to avoid sampling from closed networks (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This allowed to identify government affiliated and more independent CSOs, CSOs working on different issues and in different locations, as well as different government offices working with CSOs, to capture the existing heterogeneity of civil society–state relations. Interviews and focus groups lasted between 1 to 3 hours. All data was coded using the software Nvivo, to allow for systematic analysis of the material. As common for theory building studies, coding primarily followed

¹The article does not cover the profound changes to civil society - state relations in Ethiopia that occurred after 2018. As part of a larger political reform process, the country passed a new civil society legislation in 2019. The new law has significantly altered the legal framework for CSOs' operation and opened up the space for civic activism (Proclamation No. 1113, 2019). However, the law's implementation has lagged behind and democratic backsliding has recently been noticed again in Ethiopia (Temin & Badwaza, 2019; Østebø & Tronvoll, 2020). Covering the changes to civil society state relations in Ethiopia's recent political reform process is beyond the scope of the article.

²The EPRDF was a coalition of four member parties organised according to the principle of ethnic federalism and consisting of four member parties. While the EPRDF was formally a coalition of equals, it was de facto led by the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) between 1991 and 2018, a party representing a small ethnic minority from the country's northernmost region.

inductive reasoning. Theoretical saturation was reached once no new properties were discovered in the data. The research project was reviewed for ethics and risks as part of the PhD upgrade procedure at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences in 2015. All interviews were anonymised and data management followed EU General Data Protection Regulation requirements. In Ethiopia, no formal research ethics review requirements are posed on social sciences research yet (Federal Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014; Woldu, 2019). However, foreign researchers have to obtain permission to conduct research in Ethiopia, which requires a formal affiliation to a local or international research institution in Ethiopia. I am an associate researcher at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University and renew my research affiliation and residence permit annually.

3 | ANALYSING CIVIL SOCIETY—STATE RELATIONS UNDER NON-DEMOCRATIC RULE

Although the concept of civil society has a long and contested epistemological history, the dominant paradigm in civil society research has been constituted of liberal, neo-Tocquevillian approaches (Diamond, 1994; Gellner, 1994). Conceptualised as a “necessary condition for liberal democracy” (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 11), the role of civil society has commonly been defined as counterbalancing state power. Accordingly, CSOs in non-democratic settings have often been said to promote democratisation (Pinckney et al., 2022).

While liberal civil society theories have dominated the research field since the 1980s, they have been criticised for failing to capture civil society—state relationships in non-democratic settings (Herrold & AbouAssi, 2023; Mercer, 2002). Research revealed that liberal democratic readings that present CSOs as beacons of democracy and suggest that CSOs check and balance state power and oppose non-democratic forms of governance fail to capture empirical realities. Critical research has questioned normative and teleological readings of civil society. Capturing the practices of civil society state relations in authoritarian settings, has become the core of a growing canon of case studies in Asia (Hildebrandt, 2013; Teets, 2013), the Middle East (Aarts & Cavatorta, 2013; J. A. Clark, 2013), North Africa (Chomiak & Entelis, 2013; Liverani, 2008) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Helliker, 2012; LeVan, 2011).

Exploring the limits of liberal civil society theories, much research on civil society—state relations in non-democratic settings initially focussed on exploring why CSOs have not consistently promoted democratisation. This led to a zooming in on those parts of state—civil society relations that explain the durability of non-democratic regimes. Particular attention was paid to co-optation of CSOs and CSO collaboration with non-democratic regimes (Khatib, 2013; Rivetti, 2013). Focussing on state control of CSOs, many studies adopted corporatism theories to frame their empirical explorations (Hildebrandt, 2013; Unger & Chan, 2015). While contributing important reflections, state-centric readings of civil society—state relations under non-democratic rule have been criticised for

ascribing too much power to the state and for failing to capture the agency of CSOs (Fu, 2017; Spires, 2011).

To explain variations in co-optation and control of CSOs in authoritarian settings, research has explored variations between different policy sectors and found that repression of CSOs is particularly high where organisations work on politically contentious topics and advocacy rather than service provision (Hildebrandt, 2013; Yerkes, 2012). While those insights are interesting, they fail to account for the fact that service provision and policy advocacy often overlap (Fisher Melton, 2023; Herrold & AbouAssi, 2023; Moldavanova et al., 2023; Moldogaziev & Witko, 2023). Moreover, they are ill suited to explain why CSOs working on the same topics sometimes differ regarding their ability and willingness to drive an independent agenda from the state (Pellerin, 2019b).

Although a large amount of case studies have explored civil society—state relations in non-democratic settings, so far no comprehensive framework for theorising the relationship has been proposed. While studies have contributed nuanced readings of civil society—state relations going beyond civil society (liberal democratic) and state—centric (corporatist) approaches (Fisher Melton, 2023; Fu, 2017; Herrold, 2016), they have mostly focussed on particular case studies, instead of putting forward theories about the broader relationship of CSOs and state actors in non-democratic settings. However, civil society—state relations in non-democratic (and also democratic) settings have also been approached by a separate strand of literature, namely research exploring the non-profit (or third) sector broadly (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Coston, 1998; Najam, 2000; Young, 2000). Nevertheless, with the exception of Toepler et al. (2022), existing frameworks have not captured context specific factors in non-democratic and non-Western contexts. Moreover, as noted by Toepler et al. (2020), many of the existing models for civil society—state relations in third sector research are abstract and do not capture nuances in civil society—state relations. Most are based on the review of existing literature, rather than primary data collection.

Young (2000) for example, proposes to divide the relationships between state and civil society actors into complementary, supplementary and adversarial, drawing on rational choice theory for explaining variations. Importantly, he acknowledges that CSOs can feature different relationships with different state actors. However, the categorisation of relationships does not capture variations within the broader categories. Moreover, as it draws on studies in democratic countries, the model is based on the assumption that CSOs and state actors possess agency to influence patterns of interactions and does not reflect on the fact that in non-democratic settings, states can enforce certain patterns of interaction against the will of CSOs (Herrold, 2016).

Najam (2000) categorises state—civil society relations into cooperation, complementarity, confrontation and co-optation, based on overlap or dissimilarities of policy ends and means. Non-engagement is excluded, as it does not constitute a relationship according to Najam (Najam, 2000, p. 384). Najam's categorisation

assumes that state actors and CSOs in rather equal terms can influence their relationships. Focussing on policy ends and means, the model fails to capture that power asymmetries in non-democratic settings can affect why and how civil society actors engage in specific interactions with state actors, for example, because of fear, coercion, necessity to survive etc. (Pellerin, 2019a). Similar to Young's model, Najam's framework does not capture variations within different categories of relationships.

Coston (1998) proposes a typology of eight different relationships between civil society and state actors, based on governments' acceptance of institutional pluralism. While very detailed, the typology does not account for the fact that many of the relationships, for example, cooperation, collaboration and complementarity, for which Coston assumes the necessity of institutional pluralism, can emerge in non-democratic settings and absence of institutional pluralism, however, in slightly different forms than envisaged by Coston (Hildebrandt, 2013; Teets, 2013).

4 | CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia has a long history of traditional community-based associations, such as *iddir*, funerary associations, *eqb*, credit groups and *debo*, agricultural labour groups (Pankhurst, 2008, p. 147). These associations provide among others economic safety nets and opportunities for social integration. The large majority classifies as informal CSOs, given their lack of registration. While these associations have been inward looking, focussing on providing direct services to their members, some have over time adopted functions such as community development or labour representation (Pankhurst, 2008, p. 147). Modern CSOs in Ethiopia developed tardily and their growth only picked up when the EPRDF came to power in 1991 (J. Clark, 2000, p. 4f). The EPRDF adopted a constitution that guaranteed extensive citizens' rights, including the Right of Assembly, Demonstration and Petition (Art. 30) and the Freedom of Association (Art. 31) (Proclamation No. 1, 1995). This resulted in a growing number of formal CSOs, especially NGOs, and a broadening of CSO activities.

During the 1990s, development NGOs working on the advancement of socioeconomic transformation in Ethiopia increased rapidly in number. Moreover, a small number of human rights NGOs established themselves primarily in the capital Addis Ababa, engaging in rights-based advocacy and promoting democratisation (CRDA, 2006, p. 6f). The growing CSO activism led the EPRDF to fear their democratising potential and resulted in restrictions of the civic space (Brechenmacher, 2017, p. 67). The conflict between CSOs and the EPRDF government culminated during the 2005 election crisis.³

³The 2005 elections are considered widely as the most democratic elections held by the EPRDF. Contrary to the EPRDF's expectation, it lost many votes, especially in urban areas, but even among its rural constituency, considered the bedrock of the regime. The opposition won the majority of seats in Addis Ababa. The opposition and national and international election observers contested the counting of votes and the EPRDF government clamped down on the opposition (Schmidt, 2005).

Several CSOs, particularly human rights NGOs, provided training for opposition politicians, ran voter education programmes, and observed the elections. After the 2005 elections, many activists, including CSO leaders, were imprisoned (Asnake, 2011, p. 696).

To re-establish control over civil society and prevent future activism, the EPRDF government passed the Charities and Societies Proclamation (ChSP) in 2009. The proclamation divided CSOs into (1) Ethiopian Charities and Societies, that were founded and run by Ethiopians and did not receive more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources; (2) Resident Charities and Societies that were founded and run by Ethiopians but received more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources; and (3) Foreign Charities, that were founded and run by foreigners and operated on foreign funding. The proclamation targeted advocacy organisations and prohibited CSOs receiving more than 10% of their funding from foreign sources to work on democracy or rights related issues (Proclamation No. 621, 2009, sec. Art. 14.2 j-n). Resident and foreign charities were limited to work on socioeconomic development issues (Proclamation No. 621, 2009, sec. Art. 14.2 a-i). Given difficulties to mobilise funding locally, most CSOs in Ethiopia registered as resident charities after the passing of the 2009 proclamation. Consequently, the majority of registered CSOs under the ChSP worked on service provision. Nevertheless, the ruling coalition remained suspicious of CSOs, whom it suspected to clandestinely work on rights advocacy. As a result, CSOs continued facing problems in their work due to excessive government control.

While resident charities actively contributed to the country's economic progress (Gebre, 2016), they were seldom found to publicly challenge the EPRDF (Sisay, 2012). Moreover, many resident charities established close working relationships with the EPRDF and fit their work within government approved parameters to avoid conflict. Consequently, CSOs in Ethiopia, particularly those focussing on service provision, were often said to be co-opted and controlled by the EPRDF (Dupuy et al., 2015). Only very few studies have looked behind the 'public silence' and have questioned the state-centric interpretation of civil society–state relations, capturing the stories of civic activism from the standpoint of members of civil society (Eyob, 2017; Gebre, 2016; Pellerin, 2019a; Pellerin & Cochrane, 2023). Such critical research also refuted the idea that forging alliances with state actors by definition testifies to co-optation and revealed how CSOs used their connections to the EPRDF regime to push their agendas and question state actors. Case studies demonstrated that even leaders of regime critical CSOs often continued to entertain a dialog with the government and in some instances successfully managed to push for policy change (Berhanu & Milofsky, 2011; Burgess, 2012).

While the EPRDF ruled the Ethiopian state in authoritarian manner, state capacity differed among different state institutions (Mengesha & Common, 2007), as did the ability of those to control CSOs. Especially at local level, government struggled to deliver services to citizens and in many cases relied on service providing CSOs to substitute for the lack of public services (Gebre, 2016). Moreover, even government organisations in charge of overseeing the licensing

and work of CSOs lacked the capacity to implement their mandate fully, involuntarily creating spaces for civic activism (Pellerin, 2019a, Chapter 7). These spaces differed between different administrative levels, as well as regarding the work of the CSOs. The civic space was particularly restricted at federal level and targeted those organisations working on politically sensitive topics, for example, the defence of people's rights (Burgess, 2012; Dupuy et al., 2015). The heterogeneous nature of the Ethiopian state and civil society can account for the diversity of existing relationships between actors in both spheres.

5 | BEHIND THE 'PUBLIC SILENCE': CO-OPTATION, COOPERATION, COEXISTENCE, CONTESTATION

Based on the empirical data discussed below, the article introduces four ideal types of interactions. The ideal types are displayed in Table 1 and categorise interactions between state and CSOs, covering co-optation, cooperation, coexistence and contestation.

The proposed typology has its genealogy in previous research on civil society and the voluntary sector (See for example Bebbington, 1997; Bratton, 1989; Brinkerhoff, 2002; McLoughlin, 2011). However, it captures nuances within different types of relationships, adding to existing, more static, conceptualisations. Moreover, integrating the analysis of service provision and policy advocacy, the typology allows for a comprehensive understanding of the work of CSOs. Finally, the typology explores a previously undertheorised relationship, co-existence.

Co-optation of CSOs in Ethiopia, confirming Selznick's definition of the term (1948, p. 34), primarily meant bringing regime critical CSOs into government structures through forced restructuring of leadership and establishment of direct oversight structures. Interactions between state and CSO-actors falling into this category mainly benefited state actors. While this strategy allowed state actors to establish control over CSOs, it also made the state vulnerable to CSO influence. Reflecting a state of tension between formal authority and social power, co-optation described a conflictual situation (Selznick, 1948, p. 35) and bore the risk of reverse co-optation.

Corroborating findings from other case studies (Hildebrandt, 2013; Lee & Zhang, 2013), cooperation between CSOs and state actors emerged where agendas (partly overlapped). However, cooperation was also used by CSOs as a strategic tool to foster trust and negotiate more space for action. While mutually beneficial, cooperation did not always benefit all actors at the same time or to the same extent. Co-operation took many different forms, including but not limited to the pursuit of shared goals, a tit for tat allowing actors to pursue their respective agendas thanks to compromise and trade-off, where CSOs decided to give into state demands in exchange for political access, resources or more space of action in the future.

Contrary to complete forms of disengagement leading civil society actors to operate informally and underground (See for example Fu, 2017; Gibson, 2001), coexistence in the case of service providing

CSOs in Ethiopia translated into disengagement from state structures and operating at the margins of state power. However, as the EPRDF was afraid of anti-regime plotting and opted for close surveillance of CSOs, coexistence still translated into operating at close distance to the state. Sometimes co-existence was also enforced by state actors, to prevent CSOs from gaining access to political decision making or resources.

Similar to findings from case studies in other authoritarian contexts (Johnston, 2006; King et al., 2013), instead of public dissent, contestation mostly took the form of more tacit and personalised questioning of state power and state policies. It focused primarily on questioning state policies, not demanding regime change. Criticism was mostly delivered behind closed doors and through selected individuals, using party channels for communication. Covert contestation existed in the form of disobedience to power structures.

5.1 | Co-optation

The research revealed that some of the interactions between resident charities in Ethiopia and the EPRDF government were marked by state co-optation of CSOs' agendas and work. However, as co-optation signified the absorption of elements of CSOs into the state, it bore the seeds for struggle and contestation. The EPRDF often used repression at the initial stages of co-optation. Nevertheless, over time, it mostly reverted to negotiation and bargaining to avoid triggering resistance. Resident charities differed in the degree to which their agendas and work were co-opted by the EPRDF and some were still able to drive an agenda independent of the state, represent their members interests and pursue goals differing from state imposed parameters. Contrary to other definitions of co-optation (see for example Najam, 2000, pp. 388–389), co-optation happened particularly where agendas fundamentally differed, but also where the EPRDF wanted to access CSO resources or as preventive measures.

Interviews revealed that state organisations had in many cases infiltrated resident charities or set up EPRDF controlled associations. Oftentimes leadership positions and board membership of resident charities were filled with individuals affiliated to the EPRDF and/or former civil servants.⁴ Citizens repeatedly expressed doubts regarding the independence of resident charities and provided information on the political background of organisations' leaders.⁵ A citizen explained:

The director, he used to be a TPLF fighter. He has a party card. Everyone knows he has. And their board, its full of party members. So the organisation cannot be

⁴Interview with director of resident charity, 24.11.2015; Interview with staff member of resident charity, 17.02.2016, Interview with staff member of resident charity, 13.03.2017, Interview with director of resident charity, 15.03.2017

⁵Interview with citizen, 30.05.2016; Interview with citizen, 24.10.2016

TABLE 1 Typology of interactions between civil society and state actors.

Co-optation	Cooperation
State controls agenda of CSO; state uses CSO for its own benefits; reverse co-optation possible	Cooperation around certain issues where agendas (partly) overlap, or strategic tool to foster trust, benefitting both partners (possibly to differing degrees/at different times)
Coexistence	Contestation
CSO seeks distance to the state to pursue its agenda without interacting with state actors, sometimes enforced by the state to avoid influence by CSO	CSO contests state policy; pushes/pursues its agenda against the interest of the state (both overt and covert forms exist)

independent. They are the government. Just in a different uniform. (Interview, citizen, 08.10.2016)

The overlap of state and CSO structures favoured an alignment of the agendas of resident charities to the EPRDF agenda. Organisations often acted as gap-fillers in service provision where government resources were not sufficient⁶ and, in several cases, state offices used resident charities to control the population. For example, one of the resident charities interviewed provided information about their members to state offices.⁷ During the 2015/18 protests, some state offices mobilised resident charities for diffusing political tension and to calm the protests.⁸ Especially at the local level, many resident charities interviewed expressed support for the EPRDF agenda: “We have to support the government. [...] So we do our best to calm the communities.”⁹

Several resident charities interviewed, reported that state actors had the power to influence their decisions and demand services that benefitted the state rather than the CSOs¹⁰. Refusing demands from state offices was not perceived as an option: “We do as they ask. It's not an option. We don't have a choice”.¹¹ Examples ranged from financing government meetings and disseminating messages for the government to participating in government events.¹² In some cases—through their participation in beneficiary selection—state officials diverted the resources of resident charities to target certain groups for political purposes or demanded organisations to help raise resources from their constituents for state projects.¹³

While interactions testifying to co-optation were more frequent for those organisations directly controlled through the EPRDF, even more independent resident charities had to give in to some state demands. Thanks to direct links between the EPRDF and resident charities the ruling coalition was able to influence the activities of resident charities, whereas it relied on the threat of repression to force more independent organisations to obey. While allowing state actors to control actions of resident charities, the increased presence

of the state in civil society led to a blurring of boundaries between the two spheres and rendered state structures accessible for CSOs. Civil society organisations often made use of those links to contest specific state policies or advocate on behalf of their members (see contestation below).

5.2 | Cooperation

Co-operation between state and civil society actors often occurred where their agendas overlapped, similar to interactions described by Najam (2000, pp. 384–385). However, cooperation also happened where agendas of state actors and CSOs did not overlap. Resident charities sometimes used cooperation strategically to gain trust from government officials and to expand their space for action in the future. The existence of cooperation testified to the fact that the state was not completely independent from civil society. Instead, the EPRDF government relied on CSOs, for example, for service provision. Moreover, contrary to assumptions made by Coston (1998, p. 361), cooperation emerged despite repression of institutional pluralism.

Interactions testifying to cooperation took diverse forms. While state actors frequently had more power to influence the terms of interactions than resident charities, this did not mean that CSOs had to consent with all terms set by the state. Instead, they often identified areas of common interest, or phrased their work as part of the EPRDF policy agendas to negotiate with state actors. The mutually beneficial character of cooperation did not mean that both parties had to benefit to the same degree, or at the same time. In many cases resident charities initially agreed to terms for cooperation set by the state, to foster trust that would eventually allow them to operate more freely.

While cooperation with state officials was described as difficult by many resident charities operating at the federal level, cooperation was often perceived as mutually beneficial at *woreda* and *kebele* level.^{14,15} Especially at *kebele* level, state organisations lacked

⁶Interview with staff member of resident charity, 03.03.2016; Interview with director of resident charity, 17.02.2016

⁷Interview with director of resident charity, 14.03.2017

⁸Interview with director of resident charity, 08.03.2017

⁹Interview with director of resident charity, 23.03.2017

¹⁰Interview with staff member of resident charity, 03.03.2016

¹¹Interview with leader of resident charity 03.03.2016

¹²Interview with staff member of resident charity, 26.11.2016; Interview with staff member of resident charity, 13.03.2017; Interview with staff member of resident charity 16.03.2017

¹³Interview with civil servant, 10.03.2017

¹⁴When the EPRDF came into power, it designed a federal structure consisting of five levels, the federal state, regional states, zonal/provincial administrations, *woreda*/district administrations, and the *kebele*/neighbourhood administrations. While the *woreda* administrations were formally in charge of providing public services to citizens, de facto the *kebele* administrations carried out the everyday administration.

¹⁵Interview with director of resident charity, 26.10.2016; Interview with board member of resident charity 03.06.2016; Interview with director of resident charity, 27.10.2016

resources for providing public services and often relied on resident charities in these matters. Consequently, many *kebele* officials interviewed wanted to see resident charities more active and organisations used the state's need for funds to negotiate more space for their work.¹⁶

Although many resident charities operating at the local level were led by former civil servants, their members did not perceive them as handmaidens of the state. According to beneficiaries of resident charities, organisations successfully worked with state offices to address the citizens' concerns.^{17,18,19} Thanks to associations facilitating meetings between state officials and communities, state officials had become more responsive to their constituents and the provision of public services had improved due to the involvement of CSOs. Research participants reported for example,:

"In one of the training against HTPs [harmful traditional practices], police was trained together with us. We got access to them and they got improved knowledge about HTPs and help fighting against it now".¹⁸
"People report here [at the CSO], not at state offices. Only when they [the CSO] follow up with the government the cases are handled. Otherwise there is corruption and perpetrators [of gender based violence] don't get punished".¹⁹

Almost all resident charities interviewed participated in government–NGO forums, meetings organised with charities working in thematic areas, for example, environmental protection, reproductive health, primary education etc. Many resident charities interviewed, held that the forums provided them with access to state structures and were useful public venues to discuss with the government and share concerns. As many of the forums were attended by the media, issues discussed became public knowledge.²⁰ The problem was that agenda setting was controlled by state offices and that the forums seldom led to change of state policies. Leaders from two resident charities claimed:

"We engage in different forums. At least the engagement means they listen to us even if not much changes".²¹ "We share ideas and report to the government at the forums. They use it differently. They tell us what they want us to do".²²

Given the relative inefficiency of formal structures to bring about concrete results, many charities used personal contacts with state

officials to influence political decision-making.²³ The fact that many of their leaders had previously worked in state offices and the close cooperation between state officials and charities favoured such practices. In many instances, organisations were able to obtain land and offices for their work, help constituents access state services, and demand state officials to enforce the law.²⁴ At the local level, many resident charities worked on prevention of HTPs,²⁵ female genital mutilation and gender based violence, although these topics officially fell outside of their mandate, as they touched upon citizens' rights. Local state offices often cooperated with resident charities in these areas to meet goals set out in their development plans.²⁶ While such work contributed towards the EPRDF development targets, resident charities helped their members and constituents to put pressure on state offices for improved performance. An interviewee shared:

We work on rights issues. The fight against gender based violence. Girls rights. We work with the government. It is our joint interest.²⁷

While more difficult, even at the federal level there existed examples where cooperation between state actors and resident charities led to concrete improvements for organisations and their members. After extensive lobbying from CSOs to improve the availability of local funding for Ethiopian charities and societies, the Ministry of Finance included the possibility to deduct charitable donations to such organisations amounting to up to 10% of the taxable income in the revised tax legislation (Proclamation No. 979, 2016, p. 979). Although far from being sufficient, the public agency in charge of regulating the sector revised some of its interpretations regarding the classification of operational costs that restricted CSOs' work.²⁸

Although tight cooperation facilitated state control over the activities of resident charities, it simultaneously provided organisations with access to state structures and resources. Increased presence of the state in civil society exposed the former to influence from the latter. The majority of negotiations and bargaining between CSOs and state actors took place behind closed doors and was not publicly visible. Resident charities often directly provided services to the government, while at the same time negotiating space for action. Relinquishing some autonomy was often seen necessary to gain space for action. Resident charities that were well politically networked had an advantage compared to those that were more independent but lacked political contacts. Especially at the local level, these

¹⁶Interview with civil servant 14.07.2016; Interview with civil servant 20.06.2016; Interview with civil servant 10.03.2016

¹⁷Focus Groups with members of resident charities, 16th and 17th of March 2016

¹⁸Focus Group with beneficiaries of resident charity, 14.03.2017

¹⁹Focus Group with beneficiaries of Resident Charity, 15.03.2017

²⁰Interview with director of resident charity, 15.03.2017; Interview with director of resident charity, 07.03.2017

²¹Interview with Director of Resident Charity, 08.03.2017

²²Interview with director of resident charity, 13.03.2017

²³Interview with former director of resident charity, 11.11.2015; Interview with staff member of resident charity, 18.11.2015

²⁴Interview with staff member of resident charity 30.05.2016; Interview with director of resident charity, 25.10.2016

²⁵HTPs in Ethiopia include a variety of different practices, such as uvulectomy—cutting of the uvula and sometimes nearby structures such as the tonsils, milk teeth extraction and marriage by abduction.

²⁶Interview with director of resident charity, 26.11.2015; Interview with director of resident charity, 12.03.2017

²⁷Interview with leader of resident charity, 17.03.2017

²⁸Interview with civil servant, 25.11.2015

organisations democratised the provision of public services, giving voice to their constituents and putting pressure on state actors.

5.3 | Co-existence

Coexistence in its extreme form translates into complete disengagement from state structures. In the case of resident charities this was not possible, since all of them were formally registered and government officials regularly followed up on their work. However, some resident charities that had established relationships of trust with the government were able to operate at close distance to the state apparatus. Coexistence also took the form of disengagement from government organised activities and organisations and favoured subversion of power structures. In some cases, government actors enforced coexistence to prevent CSOs from accessing state structures. Contrary to some existing frameworks (Coston, 1998; Najam, 2000), I consider co-existence (or non-engagement), as an inherent part of CSO–state relationships.

Many of the provisions of the ChSP aimed at rendering the work of charities “readable” for the EPRDF government, for example, through the annual reporting, field visits, monitoring of internal meetings etc. The aim was to avoid coexistence and keep relevant state offices informed about the work of CSOs, to prevent the secret formation of oppositional movements. Many resident charities held that transparency in their work was important to avoid repression from state offices.²⁹ Although coexistence was much less frequent than cooperation, several CSOs attempted to operate at the margins of the state. In a few cases, resident charities secretly pursued activities that the ChSP forbade them, subverting power structures without directly contesting the state or its policies.

Examples of coexistence included resident charities producing research and providing services to their beneficiaries.³⁰ Avoiding interactions with state offices was meant to prevent them from taking control over the activities of organisations, for example, determining content of reports or selecting beneficiaries for services provided by them. Coexistence was more practiced at the federal level than at the local level.

Although few in number, some resident charities operating at the federal level used the blind spots of the agency in charge of regulating their work to carry out activities that they were not officially allowed to do. The institutional capacity of the agency was not sufficient to attain control over all resident charities continuously. However, the danger for the resident charities in question was that they could be closed if the agency found proof of such illegal activities. Where it suspected secret activism, the agency sent warning letters and followed up over the phone and in person, but it was not

able to reprimand all organisations concerned.³¹ An interviewee explained:

One of our projects was blocked for five months. They told us we should do service delivery and work on child care. We implemented the project without their approval. They called us to check, but then they stopped. They forgot about it. They don't have the capacity to monitor all the projects.³²

Several resident charities worked with organisations that did not fall under the 2009 ChSP, like *iddirs* (funerary associations), to avoid the 90/10 directive and work on rights related questions. Resident charities provided technical and financial support for example, for advocacy campaigns, without officially appearing in their implementation. Examples involved working on labour rights for women and advocating against gender based violence. Organisations admitted that the strategy could potentially backfire if the agency or other state offices picked up on their engagement in rights related work.³³ The existence of such subversive actions testified to the fact that while the state's power to control CSOs was high, it was not absolute. The threat of repression discouraged open contestation, but it also increased defiance among some resident charities, that opted for hidden subversive practices.

In some instances, forcing resident charities into coexistence was a strategy chosen by state offices to prevent unwanted influence by CSOs. Some charities tried to establish cooperative agreements with state offices, but without success. Denying organisations access to state structures was meant to “starve them out” and prevent them from gaining access to political decision making.³⁴

5.4 | Contestation

Adding to conceptualisations of contestation that have mostly focused on public dissent (Najam, 2000; Young, 2000), contestation in the study at hand took a variety of different forms. Most resident charities tried to influence state policies to ensure their beneficiaries' interests were met. However, only few resident charities openly challenged the EPRDF's authoritarian rule, given that such actions mostly triggered repression. The EPRDF reacted more harshly towards group collective action, than to criticism expressed by individuals. Many resident charities used the ability to contest at an individual rather than organisational level as a strategy to reduce the costs of contestation.

Given the high costs associated with public contestation, it often took the form of verbal criticism or subversion of power structures.

²⁹ Interview with civil servant, 17.02.2016; Interview with civil servant 17.11.2015

³⁰ Interview with director of resident charity, 02.10.2015

³¹ Interview with director of resident charity, 10.02.2016; Interview with director of resident charity, 15.03.2017

³² Interview with director of resident charity, 13.06.2016; Interview with director of resident charity, 03.03.2016

²⁹ Interview with director of resident charity, 26.02.2016; Interview with director of resident charity, 21.10.2016

³⁰ Interview with staff member of resident charity, 03.06.2016; Interview with director from resident charity, 26.10.2016

The more critical resident charities were, the more problems they encountered with the government offices. Repression ranged from threat, over denial or withdrawal of the licence, to imprisonment and torture of organisations' leaders and staff.³⁵ Nevertheless, resident charities developed different ways to question state power and their strategies often depended on their respective political network and existing power relations. Contesting state policy was not an activity reserved to organisations led by EPRDF critics. Well networked resident charities used their contacts in the EPRDF and the state to influence political decision-making and even charities whose leaders were closely affiliated to the EPRDF, sometimes criticised political measures where they harmed their organisational goals.³⁶ The director of a resident charity which was closely connected to the EPRDF explained for example:

We use the contacts we have to discuss with the government. [...] We choose the person with the best connection. We bring up controversial issues. We discuss. We challenge them. We have to. Some of their policies harm CSOs. But it is important how you deliver the criticism. You do not want to offend them.³⁷

To avoid negative repercussions from questioning state organisations, criticism was often targeted towards specific policies, not the government as such. Accusations were backed with as much documentary proof as possible, delivered in person and behind closed doors rather than in public. Moreover, resident charities often carefully chose the individual to deliver criticism, to ensure best use of networks and prevent escalation of conflict.³⁸ Many charities applied self-censorship to avoid confrontation. Interviewees explained:

"We apply international research standards in our work. The government is waiting for us to make a mistake. They wait for us to report opinions. You'd end up in jail for that. So, we are careful and back all our arguments by evidence. If we are not sure about evidence, it stays pending".³⁹ "Everything has to be evidence based and backed by hard facts because in the worst case scenario it would have to hold in court".⁴⁰

When encountering problems with one specific state organisation or civil servant, resident charities tried to use their networks to solve the issues. Rather than openly contesting state organisations, charities often tried resolving the difficulties within the state. Where a problem occurred with one particular civil servant, CSOs often

focused on finding an ally within the same state office. Where problems occurred with the leadership of a state office, alliances often had to be built with other state offices. The hierarchy between civil servants and state offices played a significant role regarding the outcome. Alliances relied on personal connections, for example, family/ethnicity/work connections between civil servants and the leaders/staff of CSOs, mutual interests, and/or the dependence of state organisations on the services of the CSO.⁴¹

Sometimes CSOs contested decisions of state organisations or civil servants directly, instead of using state or EPRDF channels. However, rather than engaging in public protests, often such instances were confined to direct interactions between civil servants and CSOs. Avoiding public dissemination of information about conflict with state organisations or public criticism of the EPRDF was seen as key to avoid repression, given that "*the government does not like negative attention*"⁴² and "*the government takes it personal if you go on the media*".⁴³ Examples of more direct contestation included CSOs setting limits to the interference of government offices in their internal affairs. Some resident charities reported that they had prevented the officers of the agency regulating CSOs from interfering in their meetings:

The agency did want to observe and use its power. We told them thank you for coming. We told them as well that they could observe but not speak out as they are no member. The agency representative was very furious.⁴⁴

Some CSOs operating at the local level successfully used their potential to mobilise significant numbers of people to put pressure on state offices. Two resident charities visited, threatened for example, to stage strikes to get their licences or force the government to revise an official decision. Interviewees shared:

"The government blocked the CSO's licence. The CSO said they intended to go on the street. The government was afraid and gave them their licence".⁴⁵ "They [a local resident charity] went to the government and made it change its decision. [...] They forced it".⁴⁶

Nearly all CSOs interviewed contested specific decisions of state organisations. Only few organisations contested the EPRDF regime as such and those were under constant surveillance. Politically well-networked charities had an advantage over those lacking connections, as they could use their contacts to push for their criticism to be heard and possibly even addressed in their favour. Contestation

³⁵Interview with director of resident charity, 25.10.2016

³⁶Interview with former staff from resident charity 23.11.2015; Interview with leader of resident charity, 25.11.2015

³⁷Interview with director of resident charity, 26.09.2016

³⁸Interview with former staff of resident charity, 19.02.2016

³⁹Interview with director of resident charity, 13.06.2016

⁴⁰Interview with former director of resident charity, 16.11.2015

⁴¹Interview with former staff of resident charity, 16.03.2016; Interview with staff member of resident charity, 27.11.2015

⁴²Interview with staff of resident charity, 05.07.2016

⁴³Interview with director of resident charity, 13.06.2016

⁴⁴Interview with director of resident charity, 18.02.2016

⁴⁵Interview with director of resident charity, 08.03.2017

⁴⁶Fieldnotes, March 2017

testified to the limits of state power and demonstrated that the presence of the state in civil society provided the latter with access to state structures and allowed CSOs to question state policies and decisions at times.

6 | CONCLUSION

The article set out to explore how civil society and state actors interact with each other under non-democratic rule. Studying service providing CSOs under authoritarian rule in Ethiopia (1991–2018), the article finds that civil society–state relations in non-democratic settings are characterised by a multitude of different interactions, some (potentially) supporting, some challenging non-democratic governments. Focussing on service providing CSOs that have often been labelled as co-opted, the article reveals that these organisations are resourceful in devising strategies that promote the interests of their members and beneficiaries. While many struggled to escape co-optation attempts, service providing CSOs under the EPRDF regime ensured that the voices of their members and beneficiaries were heard by government actors; they contested government policies where these harmed their members and beneficiaries and they carved out spaces for rights-based advocacy.

Drawing on the Ethiopian case, the article offers an empirically grounded typology of civil society–state relations under authoritarian rule, ranging from co-optation to contestation over cooperation and coexistence. The article reveals that types of interactions do not only differ between, but also within categories. For example, contestation can be overt or covert, involve public protests or critique of a state actor in a closed meeting. Cooperation can take place because of overlaps of policy agendas, or be a means for a CSO to a larger/different end. It can be initiated either by the state or a CSO and can consist of joined implementation of activities, as well as involve state endorsement of CSO driven activities. Coexistence can take the form of complete disengagement from state structures, or can mean operation at close proximity. It can be a chosen CSO strategy, just as much as it can testify to government's ability to keep CSOs at arm's length. Co-optation comes in different degrees and while some CSOs are quasi-governmental organisations, many are only partly controlled by state actors. Co-optation can lead to CSOs to work against the interests of their members and beneficiaries, just as much as it can mean providing services to them on the state's behalf.

Future research should test the proposed typology in other geographical contexts and on different types of CSOs, to see in how far it captures civil society–state relations in non-democratic settings beyond Ethiopia and service-providing CSOs. New case studies can help to identify more variations within different categories of interactions, explore overlaps of ideal types of interactions and map out within and between sectorial patterns of interactions between state and civil society actors.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data and material collected as part of this research project are stored on Uppsala University servers. Data and material are only available to the researcher, who is responsible for safeguarding and ensuring that sensitive information cannot be traced back to interviewees.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

Global democratic backsliding threatens the creation of equal, inclusive and sustainable societies and requires concerted efforts to fight the phenomenon. Empowering civil society to fight the authoritarian turn remains a key goal of international development agencies. The article at hand provides crucial knowledge that can help international development practitioners in designing and implementing policies to achieve their goal.

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