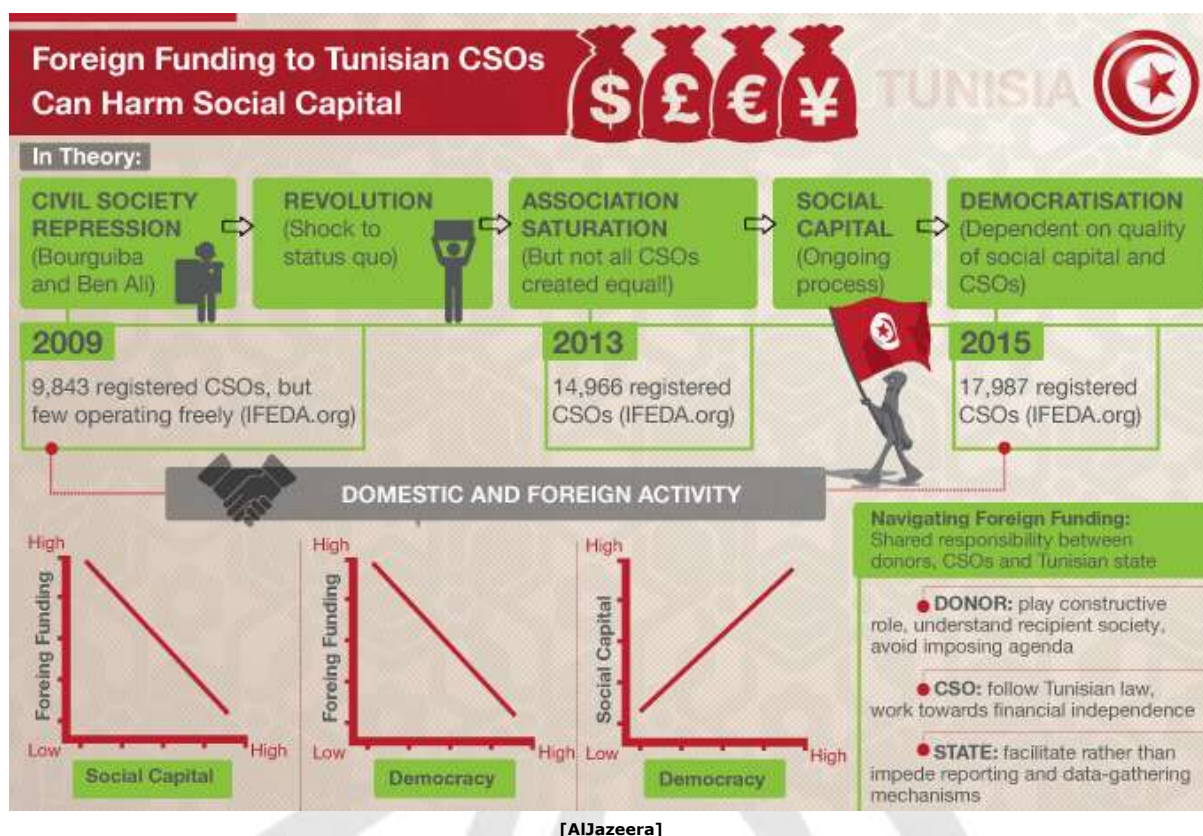


Report

Foreign Funding to Tunisian CSOs Can Harm Social Capital

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Abstract

Robert Putnam's concept of social capital is a good starting point to explain Tunisian civil society organisations' development post-regime transition. Given already low social capital among citizens after years of repression in the country, an added layer of complication comes with foreign funding, putting Tunisia's democratic consolidation at risk, particularly in terms of the role civil society organisations (CSOs) will play in this process. This report offers a theoretical framework of the relationship between democracy, social capital and foreign funding, examines the roles CSOs played in the democratisation process so far, and ends with a discussion on responsibilities of CSOs, donors and the state when it comes to foreign funding.

Introduction

Democratic transitions are rarely smooth. Taking into account internal and external obstacles to these transitions, democracy can take decades to consolidate, particularly in countries with a history of repression and autocracy. Political analysts and politicians have touted Tunisia as a country where democratic transition has occurred in a relatively smooth manner post-dictatorship. However, most of these same people also admit that it is too early to make any sweeping conclusions about the country's democratic future. This report addresses one of the challenges to democratic consolidation in the country, that of external funding to civil society organisations (CSOs), particularly those involved in the country's first parliamentary and presidential elections under the new constitution.

While these CSOs were created to raise awareness about elections, monitor elections in the country and encourage people to vote, the reality is that not all CSOs “are created equal” in terms of effectiveness. Following a theoretical discussion of the impact of foreign funding to CSOs on already-fragile, post-dictator societies, this report briefly examines the roles CSOs have generally played in Tunisia’s democratisation process, and ends with a discussion on the challenges and responsibilities of foreign funding to CSOs in a transitioning country.

In theory, foreign funding is bad for Tunisian democratisation

During Bin Ali’s rule in Tunisia, Tunisian citizens were restricted when it came to acquiring social capital – the concept of trusting other members of civil society, much less forming an organisation with them, was stifled by government-imposed norms. Social capital, defined as “features of social life – networks, norms and trusts – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”,⁽¹⁾ was often far too expensive for the average Tunisian citizen to acquire. Even mentioning political or social views in public, dissenting or otherwise, was too dangerous, because citizens could never be sure who was listening or how that opinion could impact their livelihoods, families or friends.⁽²⁾

Tunisia was not unique in this regard during the Ben Ali and Bourguiba regimes. In general, dictatorships employ civil society repression as a mechanism to prevent civil society from developing into any kind of real competition for the political machine they control.⁽³⁾ While such regimes may allow for closely-monitored and closely-controlled civil society or non-governmental organisations to develop; in general, such organisations are seen as a threat to the repressive regime’s livelihood and thus banned outright or severely crippled in their activities and influence. It is from this premise that scholars can begin to examine Tunisia’s civil society after Bin Ali’s removal. To ignore long years of repression which created boundaries not only between the government and the people, but also between the people themselves, would result in an incomplete understanding of Tunisia’s civil society post-revolution and post-transitional period.

In a sense, given years of repression and a relatively short “recovery period” in Tunisia as compared to other countries which have experienced democratic transitions, it is not incorrect to label Tunisia’s civil society post-revolution as fragile, and this report argues this fragility is further threatened by the introduction of foreign civil society and non-governmental actors which have entered the fray. In other words, Tunisian civil society after Bin Ali is already at a disadvantage – there remain trust issues between citizens, social and political capital are still being invested with uncertain returns and outcomes of the political process are not yet entirely clear.⁽⁴⁾ Thus, when there is a core issue of

trust internally and between citizens of the same state, foreign financiers of civil society projects will be regarded with even more wariness, for they introduce another layer of complication to an already shaky network.

Thus, to summarise, there are a number of variables at work in the Tunisian case. The causal arrow points from years of repression, to the revolution (the shock to the “system”), to the development of associations, which allowed for an increase in social capital, and finally to democratisation. However, as Pamela Paxton argues, some associations may actually be “detrimental to democracy”,⁽⁵⁾ and for the purposes of this report, those would be CSOs funded by outsiders without any oversight or responsible management.

What is a civil society organisation?

It is important here to introduce the definition of a civil society organisation, particularly because this report focuses on such organisations developed to raise awareness about and monitor the country’s legislative and presidential elections. A number of international bodies and academic works have defined civil society organisations, and there is consensus that such an organisation is typically not-for-profit, non-governmental and relies on its voluntary membership for decision-making.⁽⁶⁾ Furthermore, CSOs’ goals are often rights-based, meaning they aim to help citizens gain their lawful rights as well as create legal avenues for these citizens to understand their rights and how to obtain them.⁽⁷⁾ In terms of their role, the United Nations Global Compact defines it as such: “Civil society organizations – also known as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – are critical actors in the advancement of universal values around human rights, the environment, labour standards and anti-corruption”.⁽⁸⁾

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this research, it is important to highlight not only the non-governmental nature of a CSO but also the element of voluntary membership. In other words, CSOs can in fact range from small, local organisations to international NGOs, but a civil society organisation’s membership should be reflective of at least some of the citizens living in that society. According to the European Union’s official website, their legal definition of a CSO includes a list of people represented by such organisations, including labour market participants, specific socio-economic groups, those who campaign for causes such as environmental protection or education, grassroots groups such as youth movements, and religious communities.⁽⁹⁾ The definition also states, “...Members serve the general interest through a democratic process, and take on the role of mediator between public authorities and citizens”.⁽¹⁰⁾

Tunisian CSOs

A 2013 study of Tunisia's civil society organisations found that while there were 9,843 registered CSOs in the country in 2009 (pre-revolution), only ten had some independence and acted more as advocacy groups for human rights and civil liberties.(11) However, even these ten organisations did not act freely – many of their members were detained or harassed by security and government forces, stifling the organisation's activities and ability to champion for citizen rights.(12) After the revolution, the number of identified and registered CSOs rose to 14,966 in 2013, indicating that citizens were actively seeking out ways in which to become stakeholders in their government and civil society.(13) At last count, there are 17,987 registered CSOs in Tunisia, almost double the amount which existed in the Ben Ali era.(14)

But while Tunisia experienced a normal (albeit staggering) increase in registered CSOs post-Ben Ali, this presented further problems for the social capital and civil society trust issue: this large influx, typical post-dictatorship "fervour", (15) has also served to overwhelm the Tunisian citizen looking to build a network of counterparts sharing the same goals and aspirations for the future of the country. There is another problem with such a "fervour", and it is that not all of these institutions are in fact effective or developed enough to offer credible information to their members or serve any useful purpose for their target membership. Furthermore, if they are funded externally, this creates an even bigger problem for the organisations and for society at large, raising questions about the organisation's loyalty and transparency, and whether or not its agenda is in fact set by its membership or by other, external interests.(16)

The preceding theoretical discussion laid the framework for examining civil society organisations (CSOs) in Tunisia, particularly those that played some role in the country's democratisation process, including the elections, the first to be held under the country's newly-adopted 2014 constitution. These CSOs have played an important role according to Tunisian academics, politicians, students and citizens.(17) Zuheir Makhoulf, board member of the country's newly-formed Truth and Dignity Commission (TDC), says Tunisian CSOs are one of four positive monitoring mechanisms which have worked to ensure that the country's elections are transparent and democratic.(18) The other three are non-governmental organisations, political parties and the TDC.(19)

In Makhoulf's opinion, particularly given his role as a rights activist in Tunisia before the revolution, he has observed the elections process evolve. (20) For example, he said oversight of the October 2014 legislative elections was far different from previous elections under the Bin Ali regime – in the past, elections were overseen by the Ministry of Interior, meaning corruption was rampant and easy. Furthermore, in the past few

years, civil society members were fully involved in proposing constitutional provisions related to free and fair elections. Thus, it can be said that election-related CSOs have played three key roles in Tunisia thus far: educating citizens and raising awareness, encouraging citizens to vote and monitoring elections.

These CSOs were not limited to their role in the elections, however. They have also played a role in drafting the country's new constitution. Dr. Mona Krayim Dridi says that the constitution was a multi-party, multi-group effort, and that there was critical analysis of the constitution by civil society groups before it was adopted.(21) While that is a positive note, some still criticise some stages of the process, arguing that certain groups, particularly those influenced by ideology or outside actors, should have remained on the side-lines because they negatively impacted some of the outcomes. Raja Chaouche, head of Tunis 1's Court of Origin, served on the court both in the Bin Ali and the transition phase, and continues to do so to this day. She says that she has noticed a change in civil society and increased levels of awareness after the revolution, but that foreign interference, on both a large and small scale, is undesirable and has been harmful to the democratisation process.(22)

In terms of funding sources, there are several ways civil society organisations can be funded – they can be internally developed but funded from other external non-profits, or completely internally developed and funded, or finally, completely externally developed and funded. Tunisian law indicates that membership subscriptions, public assistance, domestic and foreign grants or association-generated revenues.(23) Hedi Saidi, director general of Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics, said in an interview that while promises of general foreign funding to Tunisia as a country have been numerous, the reality is that outside donors do not always come through on their promises of aid to the state.(24) Furthermore, he said there is not yet any detailed information on the exact amount of foreign funding to individual CSOs, even though Tunisian law dictates that these organisations must report their donations.(25) Decree 88, passed in 2011, reviewed and updated prior laws related to associations established in Tunisia, and includes not only general guidelines for defining associations, but also how they should be registered and run.(26)

On the other hand, civil society organisations such as Sawty and iWatch (both registered with the government) say they have received funding from outside donors after struggling financially to keep their organisation running.(27,28) Both Ghazoua Latief of Sawty and Mouheb Garoui of iWatch said their respective organisations have an annual report. Sawty said they always send their report to the donor organisations and

periodically to the Tunisian government.(29) iWatch shares their annual report with three bodies: the donors, the General Assembly and the government.(30)

Challenges and responsibilities

Given Tunisia's economic struggles post-revolution, it is inevitable that civil society organisations would seek out economic assistance from organisations abroad. Thus, it is impossible to imagine a network of CSOs in the country that are purely internally developed and funded – the reality is that citizens' finances simply cannot support such a network at this time. Therefore, because external funding is a reality that cannot be ignored, it is important to be aware of both challenges and responsibilities that come with this type of CSO network, particularly if Tunisia is to consolidate its transition to democracy.

While Palestine's occupied status is different than that of Tunisia's newly-elected parliament and president, the reality is that foreign funding to Palestine (starting from the Oslo Accords in 1993) has acted much in the way that foreign funding in Tunisia could act if it is left unchecked, negatively impacting both civil society and the economy. Dr. Linda Tabar, postdoctoral fellow at University of Toronto, said in a documentary on foreign aid to Palestine, "The main problem is that this aid is here with a very clear political agenda, which is to support the Oslo Peace Process".(31) Furthermore, after 15 billion dollars of foreign aid since the Oslo Accords, activists say they have not seen any tangible difference in moving Palestine towards freedom. For example, Sami Abdul Shafi says in the same documentary, "After all this aid, we have not seen any changes in the poverty levels, because of the fact that this funding did not generate employment opportunities".(32) This section of the report addresses shared challenges and responsibilities of foreign donors, Tunisian CSOs and the state in receiving foreign funding during this fragile period.

For the donor, the challenges and the responsibilities are first and foremost related to the agenda with which they approach civil society organisations. A donor which imposes its own norms on the receiving organisation will negatively impact democratic consolidation, because it is attempting to shape democracy in Tunisia based on its own desires rather than those of Tunisians. Nicole Rowsell, Director of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs in Tunisia, says the international community must play a constructive role in the democratisation process; however, this role must be played "on Tunisian terms".(33) Rowsell also says the donor organisations have a responsibility to understand the society in which they are setting up, and this can be achieved by "going where the people are".(34) Finally, when donors work with

existing, local civil society organisations (CSOs), this ensures that strategies to enhance the democratisation process are adapted to the target audience.(35)

The civil society organisations have a number of responsibilities, including responsiveness to the country's constitution and laws (such as the aforementioned Decree 88), even though they are non-governmental in nature. Because they face serious funding and social trust issues, they have a responsibility to be transparent with not only their financial information but also their activities. And because many of them are forced to accept outside funding in order to do their work, they must be working towards self-sufficiency so that they can be completely independent of outside influence. Of course, that does not mean that civil society organisations in Tunisia must work in a vacuum, as if the rest of the international community does not exist, but financially independent CSOs are more conducive to democratic consolidation than those that rely on other organisations for their very existence. Dr. Kais Saeid says, "It is quite humiliating that foreign monitors are brought in to watch our elections, as if we are incapable of handling our own affairs!"(36) While this may be the case, it is the natural result of Tunisian CSOs' reliance on outside donors.

Another key responsibility that CSOs have in Tunisia is creating opportunities for their members rather than acting as a crutch or band-aid. In other words, not only must they work towards raising awareness among citizens, they must also work towards programmes and activities which improve individual citizens' prospects, whether in terms of a more active political life or in terms of social and job skills.

As for the state, there must be a delicate balance in the role that they play. The Tunisian state must facilitate reporting mechanisms without trying to impact the organisation's agenda or its access to resources. As it stands, the country's key data-gathering body, the National Institute of Statistics, is still trying to assemble a database including foreign donations to individual CSOs, but the job is monumental given the large number of CSOs created after the revolution.

Conclusion

There is consensus that Tunisia is still struggling economically – the years of Bin Ali's rule in which corruption dictated the average citizen's income and the division of wealth in the country, as well as the three-year transition period in which the economy struggled to find footing, ensured that external investment in the country was a necessity for it to resuscitate its economy and boost civil society projects. However, when it comes to civil society organisations, particularly those which play some role in the country's elections, foreign funding presents both challenges and responsibilities. It

is difficult to envision a scenario in which foreign funding for CSOs is completely banned in Tunisia or any other developing country, for the reality is that some of these organisations would then cease to exist. However, without oversight from citizens, independent media and other internal actors, this foreign funding could negatively impact as well as overshadow democratic progress in the country, eventually creating a democracy unsuitable for Tunisia and its citizens' needs.

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