

Civil society is not an enemy of the State

The Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA) recently froze bank accounts belonging to several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in Uganda as part of ongoing investigations into the sources of their funding and the nature of their operations.

Around the same time, the NGO Bureau; an institution itself facing institutional uncertainty, suspended the operations of a number of NGOs. These developments are not unprecedented. With the closure of USAID, organisations are likely to experience even greater financial strain.

In 2021, shortly after the general elections, more than 50 NGOs endured similar restrictions. We must also recall the controversial closure of the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), which had been supporting numerous organisations, including government entities. Notably, the NGO Bureau only notified affected organisations after public announcements had already been made.

The measures taken against these organisations reinforce the perception that the Ugandan government continues to regard civil society as a security threat. A closer look at the suspended organisations reveals that those most affected are NGOs promoting democracy, human rights, and public accountability.

Historically, the concept of civil society has evolved in two major strands. In the first conception, civil society is understood as a political community that encompasses the State and is not sharply differentiated from society. Here, civil society coexists with the State through power relations ordered by law and institutions, with the objective of ensuring social harmony.

In the second conception, civil society exists as a self-regulating and self-governing sphere outside the State, often playing a watchdog

Civil society is a great partner in democratic governance and national development.



Robert Okot
Civil Society



role. It comprises networks of associations that cultivate civility, social cohesion, and moral responsibility, while also serving as a space for reciprocal economic and social relations among individuals.

The framers of the 1995 Constitution of Uganda envisioned an independent civil society that would play an instrumental role in checking excesses of State power. While the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) may sometimes appear oppositional, State intervention should be reserved for genuine threats, not suspicion or conjecture.

Writing from an Italian prison in the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci developed one of the most sophisticated Marxist theories of civil society through his concept of hegemony. Gramsci argued that modern capitalist States maintain power not primarily through coercion, but by cultivating broad social consent across civil society. In his view, civil society consists of institutions such as schools, churches, NGOs, media houses, professional associations, and cultural organisations; spaces through which the ruling class exercises intellectual and moral leadership.

Western States, possess dense "trenches" of

civil society that insulate them from revolutionary upheaval. Hegemony works by making the world-view of the ruling class appear natural and common-sense to the population. It is therefore notable that one of the reasons advanced by the Trump administration for closing USAID was the allegation that it largely supported Democratic Party interests. Such claims illustrate how civil society spaces can become politically contested terrain.

In Uganda's current regulatory framework, NGOs regulated under the Ministry of Internal Affairs are often treated as potential national security threats. Intelligence officials increasingly play oversight roles in civil society work, creating a climate that many organisations find stifling. Presently, registering a CSO requires security clearances at district level, from GISO offices to RDCs.

Yet in a rapidly globalising world, the role of civil society organisations in governance and development has never been more vital. State institutions and market forces alone are often insufficient to address complex social challenges. CSOs help bridge this gap by promoting participatory development and advancing governance systems that are transparent, accountable, and responsive to citizens' needs.

Authorities should therefore foster an enabling environment for NGOs and ensure that regulatory frameworks fully respect the right to freedom of association and other constitutional guarantees, as well as Uganda's international human rights obligations. Decisions that adversely affect the operations of civil society organisations must adhere strictly to due process and the rule of law.

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