CIVICUS – written evidence (CCE0128)

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Summary: In a time of growing and increasingly widespread curbs on civic freedoms around the world, there is a responsibility to protect ‘civic space’. Only by nurturing – not restricting – the conditions for citizens to organise, speak out and take action will democracy be buttressed. In the UK, we need to nurture new forms of active citizenship and everyday democracy, with a particular focus on promoting inclusion.

Civic space

1. There is a global emergency on civic space. Around the world, citizens’ fundamental civic rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are facing unprecedented levels of restriction. In April 2017, the CIVICUS Monitor released civic space ratings for all UN Member States, as well as Kosovo and Palestine, the first time a global dataset has enabled us to visualise the true scale of what is happening to civic space around the world. Only 3 per cent of people live in countries with open civic space, where fundamental civic freedoms are fully respected. Almost one in ten people live in a country with closed civic space and over a third of people live in countries with repressed civic space. That means more than three billion people now live in countries where there are serious violations of freedoms of expression, assembly and association. Perhaps most concerning, this number includes established, mature democracies, including the United Kingdom (see https://monitor.civicus.org/country/united-kingdom/ for our analysis of the situation in the UK).

2. Protecting civic space is vital to the health, stability and success of any open and democratic society. The restriction of fundamental civic freedoms undermines participatory democracy, sustainable development and efforts to reduce inequality. States have a duty - as a matter of principle and under international law - to respect, protect and fulfil people’s basic rights to organise, protest and speak freely. Yet the restriction of civic space has become the norm, rather than the exception.

3. As levels of trust and engagement in traditional party politics fall, many governments purport to be seeking new means of citizen engagement. Yet, at the same time, many are either actively contributing to the restriction of civic space, or at the very least, doing too little to prevent it. Governments need to find new ways to support and nurture civil society, including its lobbying, advocacy and campaigning functions, in order to unlock citizen action and reinvigorate our sense of citizenship. In the UK, the assumption that political life is shaped by

1 https://monitor.civicus.org
4. People need meaningful, direct ways to contribute to and affect governance, ways of aggregating local level action to national policy making. This kind of everyday democracy would amount to much more than casting a vote every few years; it would amount to a democratic transformation, an expansion and enrichment of our democratic experience that could revolutionise civic space and cross-community relationships throughout our society.

Inclusion

5. The need for such a transformation has never been more obvious. In the Global South and North, even in countries long considered to be consolidated democracies, recent political shifts have seen right wing populist and neo-fascist leaders gain prominence. These leaders are harnessing the genuine anger of citizens who feel left behind, or adversely affected, by globalisation; those angry at the growing gap between the very wealthy and the vast majority; those who see established ways of life and traditional values being eroded; those who see political elites as remote and unwilling to listen, and as serving the interests of economic globalisation rather than their country’s citizens, those who, out of frustration and disillusionment, have rejected the competition of conventional politics and instead embraced extreme positions. These leaders are positioning themselves as political outsiders, able to disrupt elite consensus; they are encouraging citizens to unravel existing political institutions and to blame minorities and excluded groups for their society's ills. Their politics and worldview is fundamentally opposed to a civil society seeking to promote human rights, social cohesion and progressive internationalism.

6. Rising populism and extremism are fuelling falling levels of public trust in civil society and providing convenient cover for attacks. At present, progressive responses to these trends are proving weak and too often dismissed as part of conventional, elite-driven attempts that are part of the problem and not the solution. In many countries, it's becoming increasingly easy to portray progressive civil society as being against national interests, public security and traditional values. A stronger case needs to be made for why a diverse, resilient and independent civil society is a critical and constructive component of any polity.

7. The challenge for civil society - and for those governments seeking genuinely to protect and nurture civic space - is to understand the anger driving these political shifts, without appeasing racism, sexism or xenophobia and to build an alternative, positive message of hope, not fear. This will require the construction of broad-based, progressive alliances, bringing together citizens to promote an agenda of inclusion. CIVICUS’ 2016 State of Civil Society report looked at how civil society needs to do more to promote inclusion. Much of civic life is about promoting inclusion. It is about amplifying the voices of the marginalised, tackling the causes of discrimination, and promoting equal rights and access to services. Put simply, civil society is often about people helping other people. But, for many millions of people exclusion remains a painful, everyday reality. And very few civil society actors have found effective ways of tackling exclusion. The Report contains 33 guest contributions that expose the common threads that characterise so many different types of exclusion, and also highlight the
disproportionate affect that civic space restrictions have on excluded groups. The full report can be found at http://civicus.org/index.php/socs2016

8. One key challenge in the UK and elsewhere is to promote a better relationship between formal and informal civil society. Any healthy democracy needs both. We need citizens to be able to organise spontaneously and we need institutions to be there long after, continuing to press particular issues and to hold governments to account. We will need to harness the potential of new tools and techniques for mobilising, without losing touch with older forms of community organising. The successful civil society actors of the future will need to be able to combine the best of both. Governments will need to recognise the importance of investing in civil society platforms that can act as vital scaffolding for civil society space. Governments and other big funders have focused too great a share of their resources on discrete, time-limited programs and measurable, incremental change, delivered by fewer, bigger civil society actors. This has led to a siloed, corporatised civil society, weakening sector diversity, grassroots citizen action and innovation.

9. Another priority for UK civil society should be the promotion of minority inclusion. We know that minorities living in the UK have rich social capital and civic networks. Yet, too often, these networks exist quite separately to ‘mainstream’ British civic life, with no, or only very weak, links to the wider communities in which they are based. We need to create new mechanisms for bridging the civic life of different communities in the UK. The responsibility for tackling Islamic extremism, for example, must not be given over to the Muslim community, to be dealt with ‘internally’. Instead, we must seek to meet such challenges by building bridges between communities, by integrating minority groups into wider social networks, and by sharing our social capital.

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