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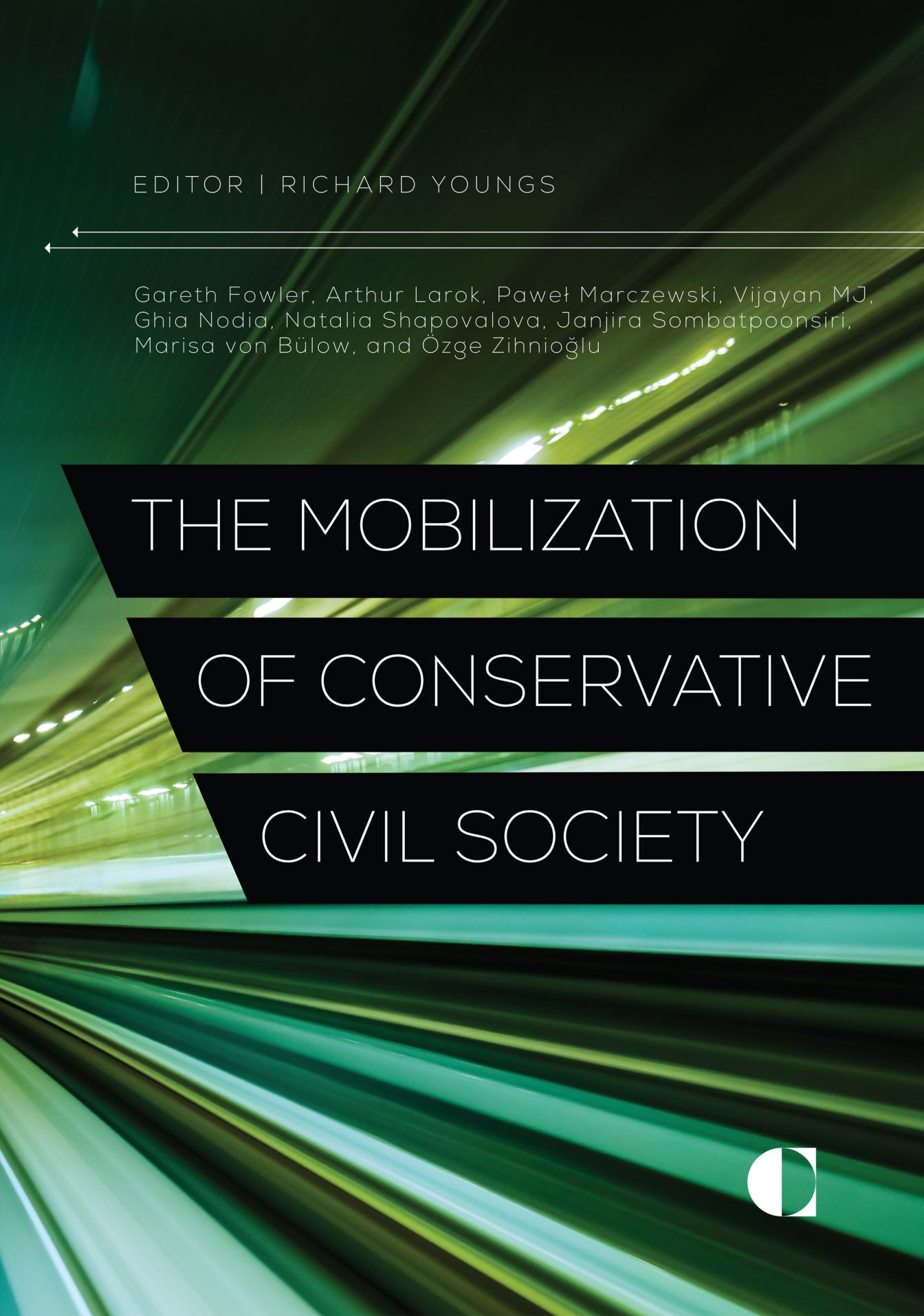
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# THE MOBILIZATION OF CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY



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# THE MOBILIZATION OF CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY

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# OVERVIEW: CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ON THE RISE

Richard Youngs

As the domain of civil society burgeoned in the 1990s and early 2000s—a crucial component of the global spread of democracy in the developing and postcommunist worlds—many transnational and domestic actors involved in building and supporting this expanding civil society assumed that the sector was naturally animated by organizations mobilizing for progressive causes. Some organizations focused on the needs of underrepresented groups, such as women’s empowerment, inclusion of minorities, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights; others addressed broader societal issues such as economic justice, social welfare, and antipoverty concerns. In many countries, the term “civil society” came to be associated with a relatively bounded set of organizations associated with a common agenda, one separate from or even actively opposed by conservative political forces.

However, in the past ten years, this assumption and outlook are proving increasingly incorrect. In many countries in the developing and postcommunist worlds, as well as in long-established Western democracies, conservative forms of civic activism have been multiplying and gaining traction. In some cases, new conservative civic movements and groups are closely associated with illiberal political actors and appear to be an integral part of the well-chronicled global pushback against Western liberal democratic norms. In other cases, the political alliances and implications of conservative civil society are less clear. In almost all cases—other than perhaps that of the United States, where the rise of conservative activism has been the subject of considerable study—this rising world of conservative civil society has been little studied and often overlooked.

This report seeks to correct this oversight and to probe more deeply into the rise of conservative civil society around the world. It does so under the rubric of Carnegie’s Civic Research Network project, an initiative that aims to explore new types of civic activism and examine the extent to which these activists and associations are redrawing the contours of global civil society. The emerging role and prominence of conservative activism is one such change to civil society that merits comparative examination.

Taken as a whole, the report asks what conservative civic activism portends for global civil society. Its aim is not primarily to pass judgment on whether conservative civil society is a good or bad thing—although the contributing authors obviously have criticisms to make. Rather, it seeks mainly to understand more fully what this trend entails. Much has been written and said about anticapitalist, human rights, and global justice civil society campaigns and protests. Similar analytical depth is required in the study of conservative civil society.

The report redresses the lack of analytical attention paid to the current rise of conservative civil society by offering examples of such movements and the issues that drive them. The authors examine the common traits that conservative groups share and the issues that divide them. They look at the kind of members that these groups attract and the tactics and tools they employ. And they ask how effective the emerging conservative civil society has been in reshaping the political agenda.

The volume works with a broad definition of conservative civil society. Part of its aim is to uncover exactly what ideas and political projects are included within the activities of civic groups that generally are referred to or define themselves as conservative. In this sense, the authors define conservative civil society as that which promotes any one or a combination of the following: conservative social values, religious values, strong national identities, exclusionary ethnic identities, traditional or customary identities and institutional forms, illiberal political ideology, or a curtailment of liberal personal rights. However, they do not assume that groups situating themselves under a collective banner of conservative civil society are all identical. Indeed, a core aim is to uncover the different varieties of conservative civil society that are ascendant across different countries and regions. Much commentary today refers to the rise of right-wing groups, nationalism, nativism, antimigration sentiment, populism, illiberalism, authoritarianism, and other terms that are all somewhat interchangeably associated with a conservative drift in popular values. The report’s working hypothesis is that more precise differentiation between and disaggregation of these different precepts is needed.

Although conservative civil society does not necessarily involve antidemocratic agendas or violent tactics, some prominent groups do include one or both of these. Some previous attention has been given to what is sometimes termed “uncivil society,”<sup>1</sup> referring to civic groups employing such violent and/or antidemocratic tactics. This report does not hold conservative civil society to be synonymous with such uncivil society. Some parts of it may indeed be uncivil in these terms; others parts will be peaceable and democratic, even as they remain critical of social liberalism. The authors are fully aware that moderate-mainstream conservative

organizations and radical right-wing groups invariably reject being associated with each other; nonetheless, both are included in this volume because they represent different strands of a commonly ascendant conservative-rightist activism—the intention is not to portray them as political bedfellows. Stressing the need to disaggregate the different strands of conservative activism, the volume brings out the complex, varied relationships among them.

The report’s case studies include countries where the role of conservative civil society has become widely debated in recent years:

- **Brazil**, where conservative groups helped push then president Dilma Rousseff out of power in 2016 and now challenge core liberal democratic norms.
- **India**, where conservative civil society underpins Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist political project.
- **Thailand**, where new conservative social movements have helped sustain military rule.
- **Ukraine**, where Russian actions have ignited a wave of nationalist activism and European Union-linked liberal values have prompted social conservatives into action.
- **Turkey**, where Islamist civil society has become more influential and is effectively sponsored by the Justice and Development regime.
- **Georgia**, where conservatives increasingly have mobilized against what they see as a European liberal elite.
- **Poland**, where conservative activism now works closely with the Law and Justice government.
- **Uganda**, where different types of conservative civic groups have formed effective alliances against efforts to advance gender equality.
- **The United States**, where conservative civic activism has been influential since the 1980s and where its further rise has been both a cause and an effect of Donald Trump’s arrival at the White House.

## Findings

Extracting crosscutting points from these case studies, the volume’s main findings are as follows.

**Extent of support.** In all the case studies, conservative civil society groups have been present for a long time, but have gained support and prominence in recent years. Yet even though

they have become more influential and high-profile, in most instances they still cannot count on the same level of support as the best-known, well-established, liberal rights-oriented non-governmental organizations. Some of the more extreme groups have gained notoriety beyond the scale of their numerical membership and level of popular support. The cases show that they can be effective in reorienting policy agendas even on the basis of relatively modest operations.

Some conservative civil society groups have gained support as bottom-up organizations in opposition to embedded elites. Others have grown and expanded in a more top-down manner as favored partners to new conservative political regimes. Some conservative civil society organizations (CSOs) are closely allied to conservative political parties; others have set themselves directly against the type of conservatism present within their political party system. This means that even though many conservative CSOs are firmly autonomous from the political sphere, others act in ways that blur the line between civil and political society. It also means that whereas some parts of the conservative civic spectrum are crucial to understanding the rise of populist parties, other parts have little to do with the populist phenomenon.

**Combined identities and drivers.** Today's conservative movements share many aspects, but are far from uniform. Some define themselves in terms of an adherence to conservative social values. Some are principally organized to further nationalistic identities. Some profess to be radical, others more mainstream. Although some function as the civic base of the much-debated rise in global populism, others tilt against that growth. Across the report's case studies, conservative civil society commonly involves a mixture of religious and nationalist values, along with an often-vague desire to hang onto or resurrect traditional identities. In some cases, however, religious conservatives, social conservatives, and nationalists are all at odds, rivals rather than partners within the civic sphere. Some of the resurgent nationalism is a relatively benign civic nationalism that reflects a search for belonging, community, and certainty; some of it shades into aggressive and intolerant assertiveness.

Commentators and analysts today routinely write about the rise of conservatism in a way that holds this movement to be almost coterminous with a wide range of other phenomena—populism, nativism, nationalism, right-wing extremism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. The case studies suggest that more care is required in distinguishing between these different trends. Although there are clear overlaps, these phenomena are not all the same thing. The studies show that several different strands of conservative civil society are on the rise and it is unduly simplistic to reduce these to a single, uniform trend. The ubiquitous press coverage generally approaches the topic through the lens of anti-immigrant positions and populism, but the growth of conservative civil society is far broader and more varied than this implies.

The case studies reveal that the economic and libertarian strands of conservatism are far less preeminent in the recent rise of conservative civil society; rather the religious-nationalism mix appears to be predominant. If anything, on economic issues the divide between leftist and rightist civil society organizations seems to have narrowed, to the extent that the conservative

camp has come to question some of the precepts of free-market globalism. This perspective helps to explain the apparent paradox that economic crisis has fueled conservative activism just as much as leftist movements.

For most of the groups examined here, conservative activism is the search for protection—protection from change, from outside economic pressures, from new kinds of identities and moral codes. Curiously, these groups generally want a stronger state and more robust government intervention to provide this protection. With the partial exception of the United States, the strand of conservatism that focuses on freedom *from* the state is less apparent in the countries included in this volume. Some such groups are present, but they are not the leading edge of today's conservative civil society.

**Democratic and antidemocratic.** One key distinction that must be made is between those conservative groups that support democratic norms and those whose beliefs rub uneasily against such values. The rise of some parts of emerging conservative civil society may pose challenges to liberal democracy, even if most of it is concerned with improving democratic quality. In Thailand, much of it clearly is indulgent of authoritarian rule; in India and Turkey, it is illiberal in many senses but is less overtly nondemocratic. In Brazil and Ukraine, some conservative activism is animated by a desire to deepen and protect democracy, while other conservatives question the adequacy of democratic norms. In Poland, conservative activism is closely aligned to a project of political illiberalism; in Georgia, this is much less the case.

In short, in some countries, conservative activism is part of the current threat to democracy, but at the same time this activism is neither necessary to nor sufficient for explanations of democratic regression. Disentangling its relationship with liberal political norms is no easy matter. Today's conservative civil society is sometimes associated with unchained majoritarianism, but sometimes bases its whole rationale on resisting the majority will. Taken as a whole, the emergent conservative activism in this sense harbors a paradox: it presents itself as a minority strand that has been unfairly sidelined by liberal majority opinion, yet it also often claims to speak in the name of a silent conservative majority against minority rights. Indeed, whether democratic or undemocratic, this is where conservative activism appears to suffer a core inconsistency in its varied guises across different national contexts. It commonly sets itself against liberalism for creating an unaccommodating hegemony, and yet it tends to admonish norms that hold in check its own hegemony over others. It complains that others are intolerant of its values, while calling for less tolerance of others' moral and political codes.

**Tactics.** The case studies show that some parts of conservative civil society are willing to use violent tactics and others categorically reject such extremism in favor of milder and more practical approaches to civic activism. The ascendance of conservative groups is often held to be inseparable from the rise of digital technology and misinformation. Some such groups undoubtedly have become expert in digital activism and have ridden the current wave of fake news and propaganda. Others, however, have developed through more traditional kinds of protest tactics or established themselves to play more functional roles within local com-

munities. In this, they mirror other parts of civil society and the range of tools that activists now deploy. Some are happy to partner with other ideological strands of civic activism, while others are unapologetically uncooperative and uncollegial.

***Extreme versus moderate.*** Flowing from these considerations is the thorny question of whether it is apt to describe conservative civil society movements as “radical.” Current commentary often tends to assume that the rise of conservative civil society denotes, or goes hand in hand with, a radicalization of political views and actions. The case studies show that a common strain of extreme conservatism is indeed gaining ground across different countries and regions. It is extreme in the sense of its questioning of basic liberal norms, in the absolutist manner in which it espouses its core beliefs, and in the uncompromising and intolerant nature of the tactics it deploys.

Other parts of the conservative spectrum do not fit this description quite so readily. Many civic groups may adhere to a very conservative form of conservatism but follow the democratic norms and campaign tactics of mainstream civil society. One may disagree with such high conservatism, but it is difficult to see how it qualifies as radical or extreme any more than extremely robust and principled forms of liberalism do. The common tendency to describe the rise of conservative civil society as radical and extreme needs to be more carefully and discerningly applied.

***International implications.*** Finally, it is clear that more analysis is needed to fully understand the implications of the rise in conservative activism for the international community and those organizations involved in supporting civil society. The short case studies in this volume do not cover this issue in detail, yet they signal how many conservative movements define themselves expressly as a counterpoint to internationally supported civil society. Notably, many conservative organizations insist they have deeper and more authentic societal roots than what they portray as a liberal civil society created mainly at the behest of international donors.

In this sense, conservative civil society is one expression among several of local civic groups’ growing concern about being too closely associated with external actors. This is a global trend that is likely to deepen rather than abate. The international community will need to strike a careful balance in response to this mindset. Although donors will need to broaden the range of groups they fund, they also will have to adjust to situations where parts of civil society will eschew the kinds of international partnerships that rights-based organizations have relied on. International civil support cannot ignore the rise of conservative activism or favor only those groups hostile to this trend. All the same, it will need to be more robust and pointed in defense of core liberal-democratic norms, as these are challenged not only by governments and high-profile leaders but also by parts of civil society itself.

# THE EMPOWERMENT OF CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY IN BRAZIL

Marisa von Bülow

In Brazil, the existence of conservative groups is not a new phenomenon. However, these groups are on the rise. Notably, they combine various strands of conservatism and use various collective action tactics. Their platforms include an anticorruption campaign against left-wing governments and a focus on traditionalism and moral values, along with varying doses of economic liberalism and nationalism. Worryingly, some sectors of conservative civil society are either ambivalent about core democratic values or illiberal, and these sectors have become more vocal and influential through the creation of broad coalitions. Their empowerment has contributed to Brazil's political polarization and risks drowning out moderate conservative voices that are committed to democracy.

## Roots

In Latin America, three factors help explain the current growth of conservative civil society. First, it is part of a backlash against the so-called pink tide of leftist governments that has dominated a large part of the region in the past two decades. The downfall of the left has provided conservative actors with a new opportunity. In this context, conservative civil society groups took to the streets and to social media, and went from being actors that mostly worked in the shadows to taking center stage in the political arena.

In addition, the spread of these movements has been galvanized by the economic crisis that has shaken the region after a period of relative stability and growth. In Brazil, the largest economy in

the region, economic growth stagnated and then contracted in 2015 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> This crisis has fueled dissatisfaction with governments as well as with the political system in general.

Finally, conservative civil society has grown through the new digital environment, more specifically on social media platforms that have become accessible to many more people and that are well suited to a style of political communication based on adversarial debate. For many conservative groups that lack organizational resources, social media platforms have become the key means of finding sympathizers and diffusing ideas.

In Brazil, more specifically, the empowerment of conservative groups has been a part of a political crisis of great proportions, which led to the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff in August 2016. This political crisis is still ongoing in 2018, amid great uncertainty about Brazil's political future.

## New Actors and Tactics

Conservative civil society groups have been key actors throughout Brazilian history. On the eve of the 1964 coup d'état, these groups held the large-scale "Family March for God and Freedom," characterized by strong anticommunist and nationalist rhetoric that helped pave the final way to military dictatorship. During the authoritarian period (1964–1985) and the subsequent transition to democracy, conservative groups were largely unseen in the streets of Brazil but remained highly influential. Then, during the years of rule by the Workers' Party (the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Rousseff presidencies, 2003–2016), these actors had considerable power to veto policy proposals and shape the public agenda.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the presence of conservative forces grew in the National Congress during this period.

Public opinion surveys show that, up until the mid-1990s, conservative sympathizers tended to be older than those who sympathized with other political factions, and tended to come from smaller and poorer counties.<sup>4</sup> Recently, however, the face of conservatism has changed. Since the beginning of the 2010s, support for conservatism has risen among young people and residents of large cities. This change is evidenced by the creation of new conservative organizations of university students, which began to win important elections for student federations in 2011.<sup>5</sup> In parallel, conservative organizers have made an effort to influence policymaking by creating a network of think tanks dedicated to discussing policy, as well as movements to organize political protests.<sup>6</sup>

Although conservative civil society groups used direct action in the past, it was not their typical modus operandi. The new groups increasingly use the kinds of collective action typically associated with the left, adapting them to their own goals. During the cycle of protests that rocked the country in June 2013, myriad conservative actors mobilized around what Ângela Alonso and Ann Mische have called the "patriotic repertoire," using the national colors, symbols such as the national flag and anthem, nationalist slogans, and the occupation

of canonical spaces.<sup>7</sup> These actors did not have a clear agenda, but some of their recurrent slogans referred to political corruption—“Either the robbery stops or we stop Brazil”—and calls for lower taxes and reduced state spending—“Enough takes without return” and “More Brazil, less tax.”<sup>8</sup>

Conservative movements’ participation in the 2013 protest cycle was, however, fragmented and diffuse. Two years later, when the campaign for the impeachment of Rousseff began, conservative actors were better organized and were more unified around this common target. Organizations such as the Movimento Brasil Livre (Free Brazil Movement), Vem pra Rua (Come to the Streets), and the Movimento Contra a Corrupção (Movement Against Corruption) were well positioned to coordinate calls for mobilization, displaying a creative and effective combination of online and offline action.

The ability to mobilize demonstrated by conservative groups during the massive protests in favor of the Rousseff impeachment stemmed in part from their highly effective use of social media. According to various rankings, these organizations are usually among the top and most reachable Facebook pages and posts.<sup>9</sup> They are also among the most followed fan pages within the field of Brazilian social movement organizations.<sup>10</sup> Their leaders have made a conscientious effort to develop a more popular and appealing online communication style than the traditional conservative sectors.<sup>11</sup> This communication style, which fits well with what scholars have dubbed “populism 2.0,”<sup>12</sup> is characterized by three main dimensions: simplification, emotionalization, and negativity.<sup>13</sup> Simplification is the mechanism of reducing the complexity of political life to a struggle between the people and its enemy. During the 2015–2016 campaign for impeachment, conservative groups combined the patriotic repertoire with anticorruption rhetoric that pitted “we, the people” against “the Workers’ Party,” “Dilma,” “Lula,” or “corrupt politicians” in general.<sup>14</sup> This fit well with the simplified language of tweets and Facebook posts that these organizations used intensively. They also adapted their communication style to use humor and irony to diffuse their ideas to a broader audience of potential supporters.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the communication style was negative in terms of the diagnostics presented by conservative groups, which emphasized the existence of crisis and urgent threats that required citizens’ immediate attention.<sup>16</sup>

## The Consensus of Brasília?

Since Rousseff’s impeachment, various branches of conservative civil society have sought new common ground. Mimicking the bridging movement of “fusionism” that brought together traditionalist and libertarian strands of conservatism in the United States in the 1960s,<sup>17</sup> the new conservative actors of the 2010s have been trying to build bridges with more traditional conservative sectors in Brazilian politics.

The ideational basis for building this “Consensus of Brasília” brings together three goals: the fight against corruption (and the demand for tougher laws against crime in general), the

defense of moral values, and the promotion of pro-business economic policies. This Brazilian-style fusionism unites some of the new tech-savvy conservative groups with more traditional actors: landowners, sectors of the industry, and conservative strands of Christian churches, both Catholic and evangelical. In building this alliance, the conservative groups that called for Rousseff's impeachment adapted their repertoire, shifting from large-scale anticorruption protests to targeted campaigns around moral issues and policy initiatives while maintaining a strong anticorruption and anti-leftist rhetoric. Throughout 2017, they supported policy initiatives such as labor law reform and pension fund reform, siding with business interests. In this context, law and order has become an increasingly salient issue because of rising levels of violence. This traditionally has been a sensitive policy area for leftist governments, which, in general, have struggled with security issues.<sup>18</sup>

However, most of the energy spent by these actors has been geared toward "moral panic" campaigns, which work well in cementing collaborative ties with religious conservatives. Sociologists coined the concept of moral panic in the 1970s to analyze social anxieties and insecurities that are disproportionate and volatile—hence the "panic."<sup>19</sup> These are short-term campaigns dedicated to denouncing attacks on moral values, with specific targets and demands. A good example is the campaign against the organizers of the "Queermuseu" (Queer Museum) art exhibition in the southern city of Porto Alegre. Between August and October 2017, a network of conservative Brazilian civil society organizations, political leaders, religious actors, and bloggers called for the cancellation of this exhibition, which displayed 263 works of art by well-known Brazilian painters. The campaign accused the artists and organizers of promoting blasphemy, pedophilia, and bestiality, and of attacking Christian values. Furthermore, because funding for this exhibition came from tax exemptions, they accused its promoters of using public money to promulgate these morally detrimental ideas. The campaign used a broad repertoire of tactics: protests at the doors of the cultural center, boycotts of its sponsors, and a carefully orchestrated online campaign in which millions of social media users shared videos, memes, and posts. Less than a month after its inauguration, the exhibition was cancelled.

Another campaign that has been instrumental in bringing together various strands of conservatism is the "School Without Parties." Created in 2004 by a state prosecutor, it has gained prominence in educational policy debates in recent years. The campaign argues that Brazilian schools are "contaminated" by leftist teachers who indoctrinate students and use their authority in the classrooms to punish those who think differently.<sup>20</sup> Based on these arguments, anti-leftist sectors and religious actors have joined forces to support new legislative initiatives that address this issue at both municipal and national levels.<sup>21</sup> These same groups have been fighting against the inclusion of content in schoolbooks that address lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues and gender issues (dubbed "gender ideology"), and against the distribution in public schools of materials from a federal educational campaign against homophobia.<sup>22</sup>

The Queer Museum and the School Without Parties campaigns have in common activists' mobilization around supposedly moral attacks on a righteous society, bringing together the

agendas and interests of a broad coalition of conservative civil society organizations and religious groups. They are also evidence of how conservative groups have taken advantage of the opportunities presented by the crisis of the left, creating a divisive agenda that leaves little space for compromise, with a fiercely antagonistic and principled rhetoric that drowns out more moderate voices.

## Authoritarian Conservatism

As the examples above illustrate, the Brazilian version of fusionism has helped unify various strands of conservative civil society groups. However, certain issues continue to be divisive. The role of the state remains a matter of intense dispute among actors. There is no common economic conservative policy. More and less liberal-oriented actors participate in various conservative groups. Although many defend protectionist policies and subsidies, others advocate a reduced state role in the economy and the adoption of free trade policies.

Moral issues are also divisive. The moral panic campaigns mentioned above allow for building alliances with conservative religious sectors but, at the same time, they push away groups that recognize the need to incorporate LGBT rights or that are willing to discuss issues such as same-sex marriage and the advancement of women's rights.

A third cleavage among these actors relates to the commitment to democratic values. Many standard conservatives are committed to democracy, but some newer movements explicitly favor authoritarian responses to corruption and so-called "moral degradation." They now openly defend the country's authoritarian past and advocate for the return of the military to power. A wider pool of conservative activists has an ambivalent relationship with democratic values.

These differences have perpetuated the divisions among conservative groups ahead of the October presidential election. For the first time since Brazil's transition to democracy, the country has a presidential candidate that outspokenly defends the 1964 military coup and unabashedly favors tougher laws against crimes to the detriment of civil and human rights.<sup>23</sup> Public opinion polls show that 60 percent of Jair Bolsonaro's supporters are young people between the ages of sixteen and thirty-four.<sup>24</sup> However, Bolsonaro does not unite all conservative sectors; many are hostile to his authoritarian profile.<sup>25</sup> Some of these critics argue that his positions cannot properly be defined as conservative.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of the specific characteristics of the Brazilian case, the processes of empowerment and radicalization of conservative civil society groups are not unique to the country and should not be understood as isolated phenomena. Brazilians have been influenced by actors in other countries and are also a source of inspiration overseas. Other groups in South America have used similar repertoires, strategies, and language in campaigns to stop and reverse the advances of women's and LGBT rights in the past few years.<sup>27</sup>

Brazilian conservative civil society has become increasingly powerful, profiting from the window of opportunity opened by the crisis of the left and helping to deepen that crisis. Through

an alliance with religious sectors and politicians, it has increased its influence in policymaking. Through its use of the “populist 2.0” style of communication, it has been able to reach a broad online audience and to organize large-scale protests, from the campaign to impeach Rousseff to more recent moral panic campaigns. This empowerment of conservative civil society has gone hand-in-hand with a creeping ambivalence toward core democratic values.

# THE ASCENT OF CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY IN INDIA

Vijayan MJ

Conservative activism has a long history in India. It underpins the centuries-old caste system that divides Indian society and the patriarchal norms that still prescribe dress codes for women, in line with the ideas of the earliest Hindu thinkers.<sup>28</sup> In the twentieth century, it was conditioned by the national freedom movement led by Mohandas Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, the original Hindu party that pitted itself against the Muslim League. These circumstances produced a more conservative Hindu nationalist force, the Hindu Mahasabha. It had ideologues who looked up to Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, involving notable Brahmins from the upper-caste Hindu fold.

Later on, the new incarnations of the Hindu Mahasabha—the right-wing Jan Sangh, in the period between 1960s and early 1980s, and its successor the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—captured the popular imagination, leading to a revival of religious and cultural nationalism. This movement was spearheaded by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, translated as the National Volunteer Organization),<sup>29</sup> the cultural front of the ideology, formed in 1925, which also produced several dozen similarly conservative organizations. The RSS was also the first conservative organization to enter the civil society space. The conservatives' joint battle with progressive political and civil activists against the political emergency in the late 1970s gave the RSS immense credibility as a civil liberties and political rights organization—despite their militaristic ideology and the semi-armed training they hold for cadres in religious spaces. Thrice banned in post-independent India, the RSS and its numerous sister organizations started growing in strength in the 1970s, and built itself strongly in the late 1980s and early

1990s through the Ram Janm Bhoomi movement (an effort to assert the supposed birthplace of Lord Ram). Affiliates of the RSS, like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad or the Bajrang Dal, flourished through communal propaganda and active violence.<sup>30</sup>

In recent years, India's conservative civil society has gained popularity. Campaigns, mobilization activities, and propaganda have all helped the rise and institutionalization of conservative civil society in India. What has most intensified the growth and legitimization of these forces in the past few years is the ascent to power of the BJP government and the macho imagery of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "56-inch chest,"<sup>31</sup> coupled with an election campaign that implied prejudice against certain communities, especially the Muslims. The BJP has a male chauvinistic, patriarchal mindset, which along with provocative public campaigns have empowered the cadres to indulge in Dalit beatings, attacks against minorities and rationalists, attacks against women resisting caste and religious hegemony, physical assault on rights-based activists and lawyers, and other acts of violence and intimidation.

This state of affairs has an important implication for India: conservative civil society has been aided and abetted by the rise to power of conservative political forces, and vice versa. Conservative civil society and politicians, assisted by some members of academia, work in a coordinated way in both online and offline campaigns. Right-wing civil society organizations often rush to rescue the government and the party in power if they feel that it is under threat. This relationship is evident in the steep rise of provocative and communal hate speeches that take place prior to national or regional elections by conservative elements of society, leading to religious polarization and the electoral success of the BJP. The linkage is so deep-rooted that the RSS even provides grassroots workers for the BJP during times of prolonged electioneering in key states.

In light of the frequently used tools of the conservative camp, India's situation is somewhat similar to that in other countries, with some notable highlights:

- campaigns around nationalism, where soldiers become icons of nationalistic value systems;
- frequent blaming of Pakistan for everything that has gone wrong in India, equating it with terrorism and Islam on the one hand and the subjugation of people from Jammu and Kashmir on the other;
- belief that love of one's country takes precedence over human rights and peace,<sup>32</sup> meaning that even killings and rapes are justified on patriotic grounds<sup>33</sup>;
- appropriation of national symbols and national leaders from history, like the national anthem, the tricolor flag, and the imagery of "Mother India" along with selective mention of revolutionary leaders from the national movement against British imperialism;

- selective use of economic arguments, as in the push to boycott Chinese goods when India and China were in a standoff on the Doklam border plateau in 2017<sup>34</sup>;
- open support for authoritarianism and dictatorship, citing that India cannot become strong without a strong leader;
- social media messaging encouraging people to trust and obey the leader, who knows what is good for the country—especially in response to people who criticize Prime Minister Modi’s *Mann Ki Baat* (meaning “straight from the heart”) talk show;
- disregard for democratic institutions and public debates, symbolized by efforts to fill judicial posts with government loyalists;
- disregard for the constitution and constitutional values like secularism, ridiculing it as “sickularism”<sup>35</sup>;
- contempt for political opposition and dissenting voices,<sup>36</sup> especially in the form of personalized attacks on leaders of opposition and progressive civil society<sup>37</sup>;
- contempt for progressive values, such as women’s freedom and equality,<sup>38</sup> and the rights of sex worker and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) communities<sup>39</sup>; and
- efforts to ban films, books, plays, and other media that do not endorse the ideology of the RSS—coordinated through online vilification, abuse, and legal witch-hunting of authors, actors, filmmakers, and other creators.

The steadily growing support for the RSS and its affiliated organizations also grew out of conservative social campaigns, including disaster management and community support for relief, community weddings, funerals of army personnel killed in action, and so on. As a social movement, the RSS has used elements from Indian culture to attract popular support and increase its public visibility.

Beyond these general features, several more specific strands of India’s rising conservative activism can be identified.

## Cow Protection (Gau Raksha) Movement

A cow protection campaign has existed in India for several decades, initiated by M. S. Golwalkar, an RSS founding member and longtime head, but recently it has grown in strength. By equating the traditional Hindu belief of “mother cow” (gau mata) with the “mother of the Hindu nation,” the Hindutva forces initiated intensive and violent protection campaigns in

2015. This push followed Modi's campaign trail speeches in 2014, where he described India's rising meat exports as a "pink revolution" that would destroy India's cattle population and dry up its rivers of milk. Among the early violent incidents that garnered national attention was one that took place in Una, Gujarat, in July 2016, where four Dalit boys were tied to a car and brutally assaulted with sticks and iron rods by self-styled cow vigilante campaigners—all upper-caste men. The assailants alleged that their victims had killed cows.<sup>40</sup>

The incident, the weak response of the BJP-led state administration, and the silence of the prime minister on the issue led to much social outrage, polarizing Indian civil society and public opinion. Jignesh Mewani, a Dalit leader and later a member of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly, was joined by more than 20,000 Dalit men and women in pledging that they would not engage in the traditional job of removing cow carcasses—stating that the upper castes were free to bury the dead animals. However, the responses did not stop the violent cow vigilantes. On the contrary, cow protection armies spread in every northern Indian state, and the number of incidents increased. Many incidents were reported in 2016 and 2017, where Dalit or Muslim men were either killed or violently assaulted by cow vigilante groups. A national convention on the problem held in New Delhi in March 2018, noted that more than 150 such assaults have taken place since 2014, leading to the brutal lynching of twenty-eight people and close to 130 getting seriously injured.

This vigilantism intensifies around local and state elections, because of their nexus with conservative political parties. The creation of conservative civil society platforms like the Gau Rakshak Dal (meaning Cow Protection Forum) is linked to the government's need to secure the majority community's votes. This activism continues despite the huge economic cost it entails; India is among the largest exporters of dairy as well as leather, and over 5 million workers are employed in the sector.

## **Love Jihad**

The term "love jihad" was first recorded in September 2009, as a moral panic involving the threat that Muslim boys were converting Hindu girls to Islam, in an organized way, through love and marriage. Although the modern Love Jihad conspiracy has roots in the history of the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent,<sup>41</sup> love jihad or "Romeo jihad" found its way into national debate through the years 2009–2011. The initial references came from the southern states of Kerala and Karnataka, where families had reported some complaints of organized conversions through marriages. Some Christian and Hindu religious organizations leveled these allegations against Muslim groups. Although the police strongly denied any organized activity of that sort, the public space of debate, often through electronic channels and social media, was soon flooded with stories, rumors, fake videos, and so forth about the supposed practice. A controversial reference to love jihad by the communist chief minister of Kerala helped ignite conservative civil society campaigns on the subject.<sup>42</sup>

Violence then ensued in the name of protecting the honor of Hindu girls. In January 2015, the Durga Vahini,<sup>43</sup> the women's wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, used famous actress Kareena Kapoor's burqa-clad morphed image in their magazine with a title "conversion of nationality through religious conversion."<sup>44</sup> This was meant to provoke and incite violence even against a certain individual or individuals for having joined the "enemy camp" and having left Hindu society—in Kapoor's case, after marrying Muslim actor Saif Ali Khan in 2012.

The popularity of this conservative campaign denied the reality that India had witnessed a surge in love marriages since 2008–2009, when social media became popular and young people had new platforms to interact. The controversy around love jihad started dying down only after the Supreme Court of India finally gave its verdict on the now-famous Hadiya case on March 8, 2018.<sup>45</sup> Hadiya Jahan (formerly Akhila Ashokan), from Kerala, had fallen in love with a Muslim man, married him against her father's wishes, and was kept in parental custody against her own wishes; she was finally set free by the court. The court ruled this was purely a matter of personal choice and that there was no forcible conversion. This decision overruled the High Court of Kerala, which had earlier ruled that Hadiya be kept in parental custody—bowing to pressure from a conservative civil society campaign.

All the same, some media took a more extreme view of the "love jihad" panic, and alleged that Muslims were using these marriages to recruit Hindu girls for the so-called Islamic State.<sup>46</sup> In early 2018, a Hindu girl from Mudigere, Karnataka, committed suicide, leaving a note reporting the harassment she had faced from some members of the local Hindutva outfit who did not want her to befriend Muslims. The day before her death, five men had barged into her house and threatened her and her mother for her "love [of] Muslims."<sup>47</sup> A BJP youth wing leader was arrested within hours of the police filing the case, based on the girl's father's complaint. In general, however, Hindutva groups are rarely punished for any act of vandalism or even outright violence. The BJP and the prime minister's office have run several overt and covert campaigns supporting the need to protect Hindu girls' honor.

## Murder of Activists and Rationalists

Conservative groups have killed some of the most prominent activist and rationalist critics of their philosophies, including journalist Gauri Lankesh (September 2017), scholar M. M. Kalburgi (September 2015), political ideologue Govind Pansare (February 2014), and doctor and author Narendra Dabholkar (August 2013). Sanatan Sanstha,<sup>48</sup> the organization allegedly involved in these killings, has vowed to eliminate more individuals. Even though the entire nation mourned the death of Gauri Lankesh, neither the representatives of conservative civil society nor the leaders of the BJP felt that it was important to at least condemn her assassination—a fact that appears to contradict their claims that her murder had nothing to do with conservative campaigns or mobilizations.

So why are the rationalists being targeted? What did Gauri or Govind Pansare do that other activists or left-wing practitioners did not do? Primarily, the rationalists have challenged the agency of Hindutva. Gauri Lankesh fought against the notion of the Hindu identity and existence, by her claims that the Lingayats were never Hindus,<sup>49</sup> should be accorded minority status, and should not be considered part of the Hindu community in the next Indian census.<sup>50</sup> This position hurt the caste Hindu sentiments deeply and collided with the RSS's agenda of creating a homogeneous Hindu religious identity.

## Spreading Hatred

Since February 9, 2016, Jawaharlal Nehru University has been the target of an extensive conservative civil society campaign. More than 6,000 students and their teachers faced allegations of “anti-nationalism,” and the local population in neighboring areas was mobilized through social media campaigns to threaten and attack the vibrant, democratic university space to surrender to the conservative political ideology. Yet rather than defend the university, the government chose to jail the president of the university’s student union, along with some other students. It is evident that the ruling interests wanted to exert control over the university’s intellectual space, and other educational spaces have experienced similar political conflicts, albeit to a lesser degree.<sup>51</sup>

## Intolerance Against the Arts

“As discussed with you, this is to specifically clarify that there is no romantic dream sequence or any objectionable/romantic scene between Rani Padmavati and Allauddin Khilji,” reads the first paragraph of the letter signed by celebrated Bollywood filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali, written to “all the social organizations headquartered” at Sri Rajput Sabha, the upper-caste Hindu civil society of the Rajput community in Rajasthan state.<sup>52</sup> This apology and truce-seeking letter followed two attacks on the film maker, crew, and sets of the film, originally titled *Padmavati* and later renamed *Padmavat*, which featured a historical romance between a Hindu queen and a Muslim king.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this surrender of artistic freedom to such violence-prone mass social organizations, the film had to wait for many months to be released, and its final approval involved hefty ransom payments made to several agencies. A particularly uncivil organization, the Sri Rajput Karni Sena, was behind much of the violent protests and attacks. Four state governments banned the film and the Supreme Court of India had to step in to protect the constitutional rights of the filmmaker to release a censor-board-certified film in India and abroad. But the film’s release was secured only after the director changed the title of the film, deleted several scenes, and apologized to several conservative civil society organizations, who had threatened to kill him and the lead actress of the film, Deepika Padukone, who played Padmavati.

The fact that popular vernacular authors like Perumal Murugan have given up writing in protest of similar persecution, witch hunts, and harassment reflects the intensity of such campaigns and the long-lasting impact they will have on India's polity, society, and culture.<sup>54</sup> The number of writers and theater people who have been engaged in farcical criminal defamation suits across the country also reflects the reach of conservative civil society organizations.

The above case studies are important in order to understand the links between these conservative campaigns and their electoral patrons. Each of these campaigns have helped the government mobilize and polarize the polity in order to win elections—including in the biggest state in India, Uttar Pradesh, which is currently ruled by the BJP and has a controversial Hindu priest as the chief minister.

## A Turn?

Other popular campaigns of RSS-linked groups include Valentine's Day vandalism against couples in public spaces; attacks against sex workers and the LGBT community by moral-policing agencies of the conservative Hindutva civil society; violent campaigns initiated against Muslim refugees like the Rohingyas and Bangladeshi migrants in border states like Assam (currently ruled by a BJP government); and physical assaults on student leaders, eminent lawyers, and activists.

Of late, India has seen a series of agitations against the government, akin to the wave of popular protests in 2012–2013. However, in recent months, these protests have turned against the conservative political and religious ideology. One notable protest sprang up in response to the rape and murder of an eight-year-old Muslim shepherd girl, Asifa, by members of the majority community who committed not just a sexual crime but a planned and organized hate crime against the victim's community. The fact that conservative civil society organizations supported and defended Asifa's rapists and murderers struck the conscience of many Indians, and led to mass outrage against the silence of the ruling party on the issue as well. Online campaigns like #NotInMyName and #JusticeforAsifa reflected this public support. On a recent trip to the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Modi was faced with a large mobilization on the streets of London that used the social media tag #ModiGoBack.<sup>55</sup> However, it is too early to say whether such a turn of events will translate into any loss of popularity for the Modi government and the conservative civil society organizations that back it, especially with India's general elections less than a year away.



# **CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY IN THAILAND**

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri

As a primarily nationalist-royalist movement, Thailand's conservative civil society has sought to preserve the traditional political order. This aim reflects mainstream Thai identity premised on the belief that upholding monarchical rule and Buddhism ensures national survival. When social change, particularly democratization, has challenged this identity, conservative movements have coalesced to counter the perceived threats. As the past decade of protracted political conflict has eroded the traditional political order, nationalist-royalist movements have aligned with other civil society organizations that are disillusioned with electoral democracy. This development has contributed to Thailand's recent democratic breakdown.

## **Civic Networks Against Democracy**

Although Thailand's nationalist-royalist social movements are not a novel phenomenon, their leadership of a wider civic network against democracy is relatively new. Their philosophies are centered on the twin ideologies of nationalism and royalism, which propel them to defend three pillars: Thai national identity, the monarchy, and Theravada Buddhism. These movements first appeared in Thailand in response to the 1973 mass demonstrations that helped bring down the military government. As the surge of communist influence in Southeast Asia threatened traditional elites, citizens across the country mobilized to participate in militia groups founded by elements within the army and the police. These groups included Krathing Daeng (Red Gaurs), Nawaphon (Ninth Power), and Luk Sua Chaoban (Village Scouts). They

took part in the brutal crackdown against the 1976 student uprising and the nationwide communist insurgency.<sup>56</sup> Afterward, Thailand entered a long period of military dictatorship and authoritarianism.

With the 1992 democratic transition and the 1997 “people’s constitution,” the media tycoon-turned-politician Thaksin Shinawatra and his political party, Thai Rak Thai, took center stage. The party’s reformist policies received overwhelming popular support, particularly in the country’s impoverished north and northeast.<sup>57</sup> Thaksin was a divisive figure, and in many senses was a “reluctant” populist.<sup>58</sup> For his rural constituents, he offered economic equality underpinned by electoral representation. Bangkok’s middle class, by contrast, generally regarded him as a corrupt politician. Many civil society organizations criticized his neoliberal economic policies and record of human rights abuses. Conservative elites saw him as a rival to King Bhumibol’s charisma. Civic coalitions formed against Thaksin. Their mass protests paved the way for military coups in 2006 and 2014.

These conservative civic coalitions against democracy have taken several forms and have evolved over time. The People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) was active from 2005 to 2008. Also known as yellow shirts, the eclectic PAD activists and sympathizers included traditional elites, royalist-nationalist activists, disgruntled business groups, Buddhist networks, grassroots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and student movements. Their common goal was to get rid of Thaksin. The PAD relied on nonviolent direct actions, but also carried out campaigns of vandalism designed to paralyze Thaksin-backed governments. Its tactics included park camping; televised speeches; rallies; blockades of roads, state buildings, and airports;<sup>59</sup> boycott campaigns; and various cultural activities to propagate anti-Thaksin messages.<sup>60</sup> PAD protest campaigns focused on demeaning Thaksin as a corrupt, immoral, and disloyal politician; casting representative democracy as an inefficient system empowering “bad” politicians; and stereotyping rural constituents as poor, uneducated, and unready for democracy. It sought royal endorsement of military intervention to “cleanse” Thai politics.<sup>61</sup>

After Thaksin’s 2011 electoral victory, the PAD reorganized as the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), and launched nationwide antigovernment campaigns in 2013 and 2014. The movement was determined to overhaul the entire democratic system under the slogan “Reform Before Election.” Spearheaded by a former opposition politician, the PDRC received support from diverse segments of civil society, including student groups, academia, unions, certain NGOs, individual monks, entertainment industries, and religious organizations.<sup>62</sup> The PDRC claimed to represent the “great mass of people” (*muan maha prachachon*) yet, paradoxically, its central proposal for political reform was to replace elected representatives with a handful of unelected but ostensibly moral leaders.<sup>63</sup> Many PDRC supporters, mainly from the Bangkok middle class, mistrusted the rural population’s electoral choices.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the advent of the red shirts—a mostly rural and working-class political movement formed after the 2006 military coup in opposition to the traditional elites of the PAD—and their participation in the 2010 urban riots made conservatives see democracy as a danger.<sup>65</sup>

The PDRC's armed guards and right-wing activists frequently intimidated ordinary citizens and journalists, and engaged in head-on clashes with the police and red-shirt militants.<sup>66</sup> The PDRC's defining moment as a civic network against democracy was an anti-election campaign launched after the government announced snap elections in 2014. PDRC activists blocked registration venues and polling stations, and attacked voters. Partly because of these tactics, electoral turnout was historically low.<sup>67</sup> The Constitutional Court, with its entrenched support for traditional elites, subsequently voided the results of the election, and the political impasse became the pretext for the army's seizure of power in May 2014. The military junta then picked up the torch of royalist conservatism, institutionalizing citizens' vigilante activism and promulgating ultranationalist rhetoric.

## Conservative Segments of Thailand's Civil Society

Thailand's conservative civil society comprises three strands: nationalist-royalist social movements, Buddhist groups, and some development NGOs. Activism by the first group is a default response to threats posed to the traditional political order by electoral politics. In contrast, many NGOs joined forces with nationalist-royalist movements and traditional elites because of their resentment toward populist encroachments into rural development. For their part, Buddhist conservative groups share select political positions with nationalist-royalist movements and the NGOs.

### Nationalist-Royalist Movements

Nationalist-royalist movements seek to defend conservative national identity from what they see as existential threats—whether Thaksin, the red shirts, or social change in general. The key difference from past right-wing groups is the way today's conservative activists use online trolling and cyberbullying to expose and punish anyone who criticizes the royal family. This category includes several important conservative civic groups:

- Social Sanction (SS) is one of the earliest civic groups that monitored lèse-majesté (offending the monarchy) postings on social media from 2010.<sup>68</sup> The group shared personal profiles of lèse-majesté transgressors on the SS Facebook page for public bullying. Defamatory comments often painted transgressors as un-Thai, ungrateful, and evil.<sup>69</sup> A co-founder of SS believed that Thailand "was sinking into an abyss as the result of corrupt politicians and they had no faith in police or any established social institution except the monarchy."<sup>70</sup> At its peak, the SS Facebook page had more than 30,000 likes.<sup>71</sup>
- Rubbish Collection Organization (RCO) was founded during the 2013–2014 PDRC demonstration and is headed by the former army major, medical doctor, and ultraroyalist Rienthong Nanna. The RCO combines estab-

lished forms of mob activism with professional military-style organization. It aims to rid Thailand of “social rubbish” and to “eradicate *lèse-majesté* offenders completely.”<sup>72</sup> The RCO would expose breaches of *lèse majesté*, and then report them to the police. If no legal action was undertaken, it would rely on systematic mobbing by disclosing an offender’s private address and mobilizing royalists to taunt the offender at her or his private residence. In one case, an offender’s parents were pressured to file a case of *lèse-majesté* against their own daughter.<sup>73</sup> In addition to cyberbullying, the RCO publicizes state-organized mass events on its Facebook page, basing its rhetoric on civic volunteerism.<sup>74</sup>

- The Cyber Scouts program is a government-initiated civic network, reminiscent of the anticommunist, right-wing paramilitary Village Scouts of the 1970s. Founded in 2010 and currently operating under the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society, the program has offered training workshops for high school and university students across Thailand. Its objectives are two-fold: indoctrinating the younger generation with ultraroyalist values and creating a youth-based nationwide network of online surveillance of *lèse-majesté* violations.<sup>75</sup> The Cyber Scouts’ work includes incognito methods such as befriending suspects on Facebook and starting conversations about sensitive issues. They also report alleged violations of the *lèse-majesté* law.<sup>76</sup> The program was shut down in 2011 during the red shirt-led government but was reactivated after the 2014 coup. As of 2016, 112 schools were committed to the program. More than 120,000 students have been recruited as Cyber Scouts, and the number may double in the near future.<sup>77</sup>

Other civic initiatives to expose online breaches of *lèse-majesté* law include the Network of Volunteer Citizens to Protect the Monarchy on Facebook and the Anti-Ignorance Association. Their online monitoring and reporting of *lèse-majesté* cases to the police have led to charges being pressed against red-shirt suspects.<sup>78</sup> Since the 2014 coup, the number of royalist Facebook pages has multiplied. They usually share doctored images, which sometimes contain obscene and sexist captions that demonize dissidents. They also misquote activists’ interviews or speeches in order to highlight their political partisanship with red shirts and disloyalty toward the palace.

In addition to these organized groups, ordinary citizens rushed to report allegations of *lèse-majesté* violations, especially after King Bhumibol’s death in 2016.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, mourners took matters into their own hands by attacking those whom they viewed as behaving inappropriately in times of grief.<sup>80</sup> In conservative Thai political culture, this hysterical suspicion of antimonarchy offenses was an extreme but understandable reaction to the king’s death, but conservative movements have also deliberately fanned ultraroyalist euphoria.<sup>81</sup>

## Religious Figures and Activist Groups

In addition to royalist vigilante groups, activism by militant Buddhist monks and religious conservatives constitutes a key component of Thailand's conservative civil society.<sup>82</sup> Religious figures and collective groups have engaged in two types of activism: political protests and policy advocacy for a religious-nationalist agenda.

Santi Asoke, a sectarian political movement, actively participated in the 2006 and 2008 anti-Thaksin demonstrations that unseated two red-shirt-backed governments. Santi Asoke originated in a rebellion against state-controlled *sangha* (monastic communities), and many initially regarded it as a reformist movement. But its trajectory changed when the Santi Asoke leadership fell out with Thaksin over the clash between the group's nationalist-communitarian position and Thaksin's policies promoting globalized capitalism. One of the group's leaders later spearheaded the PAD protests.<sup>83</sup> Later, in 2009, Santi Asoke's factions were involved in nationalist protests during the Thai-Cambodian border dispute.<sup>84</sup> Although Santi Asoke's activism may not be inherently antideocratic, its resentment of Thaksin led its members to join protest movements contributing to democratic breakdown.

While individual monks incited right-wing movements to use violence against public enemies back in the 1970s, the role that Pra Buddha Isara, the militant monk, took in the PDRC marked a critical shift. With close ties to the organizers of the 2014 coup, the monk held views similar to traditional elites—demonizing electoral politics and dismissing rural constituents.<sup>85</sup> Not only did he utilize religious teachings to justify violence against the PDRC's political opponents, Budhha Isara headed a PDRC militant wing and participated in armed clashes with red-shirt activists.<sup>86</sup>

The Committee to Promote Buddhism as the State Religion is a policy advocacy group, lobbying the government constitutionally to declare Buddhism as Thailand's national religion. It argues that such a legal move would defend Buddhism from internal and external threats, particularly from the eroding relevance of Buddhism in Thai everyday life and the raging Muslim insurgency in the country's deep south.<sup>87</sup> Its policy agenda is aligned with the junta's nationalist policies to propagate moral values, gaining it increased influence in the drafting of the new constitution.

## Development NGOs and Union Activists

Development NGOs and union activists supported reformist and democratic forces in the 1990s but have gradually moved toward a more conservative position, eventually joining the PAD's and PDRC's struggle against democracy. These civil society organizations include trade and state-enterprise unions as well as health and development NGOs such as AIDS Network, Southern Federation of Small Scale Fishers, Northern Farmer Alliance, Ecology Movement, the Alternative Agricultural Network of Isan, Thai Volunteer Service, the Consumers' Association, and Slum Dwellers Group.<sup>88</sup>

NGOs have actively participated in antidemocracy coalitions for three key reasons. First, many development NGOs disagreed with Thaksin's economic policies, which they felt would destroy the community-based subsistence economy and Thailand's unique village culture.<sup>89</sup> His neoliberal policies frustrated union activists.<sup>90</sup> Second, in typically populist style, Thaksin considered the NGOs to be interlopers, meddling between him and his grassroots supporters. Consequently, he silenced their criticisms through various patterns of repression.<sup>91</sup> Lastly, most development NGOs subscribe to notions of communitarianism; in the Thai context, this philosophy values traditional political order over representative democracy, which is perceived as inherently Western and thus culturally inappropriate.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

Three key characteristics of Thailand's conservative civil society may be drawn from this overview, some of which are distinct from conservative society elsewhere. First, despite different groups' divergent paths of development, this segment of civil society tends to have similar doubts concerning the values of representative democracy. This is particularly the case when electoral politics challenge fundamental ideologies that these diverse groups commonly hold, namely nationalist communitarianism, royalism, and morality-based despotism.

Second, the proliferation of conservative civil society groups is a reaction to change in the political order, similar to conservative civil society in other countries. These groups receive tremendous support from a large segment of the populace who fear far-reaching transformations.<sup>93</sup> In Thailand, sources of change range from the rise of allegedly populist politicians and the rural population's shift in loyalty away from traditional institutions to the possible weakening of royal influence—the last fear being especially acute since the death of King Bhumibol. Although the younger generation and those who have benefited from political transformation may be eager for change, a significant part of the population supports conservative groups that will defend the old political order. The mobilization of civil society against democracy reflects this increased social polarization.

Finally, Thailand's conservative civil society is built on a coalition of ideologically diverse groups. Traditional elites and nationalist-royalist movements gained political momentum at the same time that Thaksin isolated NGOs, the media, and constituents outside his northern and northeastern footholds. In addition, ideologies entrenched in Thai society enabled elites and nationalist-royalist movements to realign their coalition. They successfully incorporated grievances of different civil society groups into their antidemocratic agenda. This agenda seeks to attribute social upheaval, polarization, immoral politics, corruption, neoliberal encroachment, and growing republicanism to elected politicians empowered by representative democracy. This strategically diversified and unified political messaging, when used against opponents, allowed traditional elites and nationalist-royalist movements to claim a popular basis for their activism. The result was the paradoxical invoking of "people's power" against democracy in 2006 and 2014.

# THE TWO FACES OF CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY IN UKRAINE

Natalia Shapovalova

Although conservative civil society groups existed in Ukraine long before the 2013–2014 Euromaidan demonstrations and the ongoing armed conflict in Donbas, they have grown in number and prominence since 2014. Two different strands of conservative civil society are on the rise in Ukraine. One is a series of civil society groups focused on conservative social and religious values. These have gained support in part as a backlash to Ukraine's adoption of European Union (EU) legal norms. The other is an extreme, far-right nationalist strand of civil society that has gained prominence in reaction to Russia's military intervention.

These two types of conservative civil society both espouse certain traditional values, but their political aims and tactics are at odds with each other. Radical far-right groups are violent and nondemocratic, whereas values-based groups preach nonviolent action and promote democracy. The traditionalists might object that far-right groups should not be defined as properly “conservative”; this chapter examines both strands of civil society not because they are equivalent or allied in any sense, but because they represent two different types of right-wing activism that currently are on the rise in Ukraine.

## Values-Oriented Conservatives

Mainstream conservative civil society groups united around religious and spiritual values include churches and other kinds of religious-based civic movements. These groups are non-

violent and support democratic values. They use democratic procedures to promote their interests. Their participation in public life is mainly through services they provide to their members, awareness raising, and advocacy.

Several “For Life” movements, which engage in awareness raising and advocacy against abortion, contraceptives, and euthanasia, and oppose the legalization of same-sex partnerships, have gained momentum in recent years and are particularly active in western Ukraine.<sup>94</sup> Their activists go to schools to influence students, organize pro-life marches and demonstrations against abortion and so-called homosexual propaganda, and organize petition-signing campaigns. These movements frame abortion as a violation of the right to life and draw on the human rights agenda to promote their values.

A number of “pro-family” movements also have risen to prominence in Ukraine. The All Together Movement, established in 2010, organizes family festivals, street marches, and educational events to unite people around such goals as the promotion of a secure society, strong families, religious freedom, health care, and charity. In June 2017, the group organized the Family Festival in central Kyiv and called on the authorities to do more to protect traditional family units. In a resolution signed by nearly 500 festival participants, the movement spoke out against amendments to the Ukrainian constitution that aimed to change the definition of marriage to not be restricted to a union between a woman and a man. They have also mobilized against concepts such as sexual orientation and gender identity being included in Ukrainian legislation, against legislative plans to introduce civil partnerships, against accelerated administrative procedures for marriage and divorce, and against “propaganda and popularization of different types of deviant sexual behavior and anti-family ideas.”<sup>95</sup> To this end, these movement started a media campaign in Ukrainian regions called “Do Not Cut the Family!,” which advocates against the implementation of the National Human Rights Action Plan. The movement complains that this act aims to align Ukrainian legislation with “negative EU standards” in family and civil law.

In 2014, an international association called Emmanuil established the Ukraine for a Family! alliance of pro-family organizations. The idea behind establishing a new pro-family civic association is that the “situation with the family worsens every year in Ukraine” despite the existence of many pro-family organizations.<sup>96</sup> The alliance organizes the Ukrainian Family Forum in Kyiv, which brings together state officials, politicians, and church and civil society representatives.

The membership of such conservative groups is not large, but their street actions are supported by a sizeable core of sympathizers. Two-thirds of Ukrainians consider themselves believers, but only about 20 percent are regular churchgoers.<sup>97</sup> Among the Orthodox churches, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is the most conservative. In 2013, it campaigned against the adoption of an antidiscrimination law that included protection for sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>98</sup> During the Euromaidan protests, this church

distanced itself from the prodemocracy protesters. Many of its clerics and activists spoke out against integration with the EU, describing it as “Eurosodom” and an “aggressively secular, anti-Christian civilization.”<sup>99</sup> In June 2014, Metropolitan Onufry stated that the laws of the new European world are “unacceptable to us,” pointing to same-sex marriages, euthanasia, and abortion legislation.<sup>100</sup> Other key Ukrainian Christian churches—including the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, and the Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine—support Ukraine’s EU integration, even though they oppose the adoption of certain European norms.

The Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations tries to reconcile support for EU integration with the aim to protect “traditional Ukrainian moral and family values.” In 2007, it passed a seminal resolution that pro-family activists continue to support: “We do not advocate for discrimination against those who consider themselves homosexuals, but we are categorically opposed to the fact that homosexual life and behavior are treated as natural, normal, and useful for society and individuals.”<sup>101</sup> The council campaigns against Ukraine’s ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.<sup>102</sup> In December 2017, Ukraine’s parliament declined to ratify this convention. To many, this demonstrated the council’s increasingly strong political influence.

Mainstream conservatives do not have a specific political party that represents their interests, but many parties and politicians support them. The 2015 parliamentary votes on antidiscrimination amendments to the Labor Code showed that Ukrainian politicians were reluctant to support a ban on discrimination on the grounds of gender identity and sexual orientation. Without the EU promise of a visa-free regime for Ukrainians, it is difficult to imagine that such a law would have even been put on the parliamentary agenda. The most ardent supporters of conservative values are united in the interdenominational For Spirituality, Morality and Health of Ukraine association. The leader of this group is Pavlo Unhurian, a member of the Motherland (Batkivshchyna) Party and also a leader of the Union of Young Christians of Ukraine, a civic association that openly opposed the antidiscrimination legislation.

In general, the churches’ influence and presence have grown since the Euromaidan. They provided support to Euromaidan activists and then to combatants and their families, as well as civilians in Donbas. Churches are one of the most trusted social institutions in Ukraine. This trust has given them solid grounds to become more outspoken on traditional moral and family values. There is a deepening clash between this conservative strand of civil society and Ukraine’s more liberal groups that promote gender equality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights as a part of the human rights agenda. The political impact of mainstream conservative civic groups has increased at the regional level. In December 2015, the Ivano-Frankivsk City Council approved a resolution calling upon the Ukrainian parliament to discriminate against the LGBT community. In September 2017, the Poltava City Council approved a similar statement.<sup>103</sup>

A public opinion poll conducted by Rating Pro shows that, between 2012 and 2016, the conservative constituency in Ukraine grew on issues such as opposition to same-sex marriage (support for a ban increased from 60 percent to 69 percent), employment of immigrants (support for a ban increased from 27 percent to 39 percent), and access to soft drugs such as marijuana (support for a ban increased from 31 percent to 37 percent).<sup>104</sup> A quarter of respondents supported a ban on abortion.

## Radical Nationalists

Far-right nationalist groups represent a very different part of Ukrainian conservative civil society. The Euromaidan protests, the Russian occupation of Crimea, and separatist actions in eastern Ukraine have all spurred a national awakening. Although this movement stems mostly from benign Ukrainian patriotism, it has also brought ultraright nationalist groups to prominence. Though a small minority at the Euromaidan protests, radical far-right groups were the main collective agent engaging in physical violence.<sup>105</sup> They also played a role in mobilizing Ukrainians to join volunteer battalions in security operations in eastern Ukraine (although according to one estimate, fewer than 10 percent of Ukrainian soldiers served in units with far-right roots).<sup>106</sup>

The most visible radical far-right groups appeared in the wake of the Euromaidan protests and the armed conflict in Donbas. The Right Sector is an informal coalition of nationalist organizations, activists, and football ultras (fanatical fans of a particular team) formed at the Euromaidan demonstrations. It has spawned a voluntary battalion, a political party, and a youth civic organization. The Right Sector party positions itself first of all as a “street politics” party. The Azov Battalion was formed in May 2014 and initially was led by Andrii Biletski, who was elected to the Ukrainian parliament in October 2014. Out of this organization grew the National Squads, a civic association whose mission is “to provide order on the streets of Ukrainian cities,” and the National Corps political party. The National Corps advocates the idea of “economic nationalism,” which implies the nationalization of strategic sectors of Ukraine’s economy.<sup>107</sup> Both the National Corps and the Right Sector are against Ukraine seeking membership of the EU.

The Right Sector’s ideology draws on that of Tryzub, a militant fraternity-like organization founded in 1993, which in turn is based on the Ukrainian nationalism of the 1940s, particularly the works of political activist Stepan Bandera.<sup>108</sup> It attributes Ukraine’s problems to “former Moscow occupants and colonists, the Moscow fifth column presented by different ‘red’ and left centrist’ parties.”<sup>109</sup> The core supporters of the Azov Battalion are the Kyiv-based Social National Assembly (established in 2008 by Kharkiv-based paramilitary group the Patriot of Ukraine) and other small ultraright groups that have their roots in the early 1990s. The Azov Battalion’s emblem is the overlapping letters I and N to symbolize the “Idea of Nation,” which is also a mirror image of the Wolfsangel symbol used by some Nazi SS divisions during World War II and post-1945 neofascist organizations.<sup>110</sup>

Another ultraright movement with a more civic—as opposed to political—identity is C14. Founded in 2009, C14 became more widely known during and after Euromaidan. It employs and justifies violence against left-wing groups, feminists, LGBT activists, the Russian Orthodox Church, and ethnic minorities such as Roma. Some researchers and human rights defenders call them a neo-Nazi group because of their symbols and alleged tolerance for racism and antisemitism; the leadership denies these accusations.<sup>111</sup> C14 leader Yevhen Karas was on the electoral list of the far-right Freedom (Svoboda) Party in the 2014 Kyiv City Council elections.

The Freedom Party, the Azov Battalion, the Right Sector, and C14 form an informal alliance of nationalist groups to combat Ukraine’s “destabilization.”<sup>112</sup> They lobby for “the right to armed defense.” The formation of voluntary battalions and paramilitary groups on both the Ukrainian and separatist-controlled sides of the contact line in Donbas was a response to the state’s failure to provide citizens with security.<sup>113</sup>

These radical groups regularly interrupt or attack public lectures, film screenings, and public assemblies that they accuse of propagating homosexuality or other liberal views.<sup>114</sup> They engage in acts of vandalism toward “enemy” mass media and other institutions. In March 2018, National Corps representatives in Poltava stormed a venue where psychologists were trained on how to work with representatives of the LGBT community.<sup>115</sup>

The groups also act as a kind of civic police holding “preventive talks” with “separatism supporters,” which in practice means threatening or applying violence.<sup>116</sup> In June 2017, C14 boasted that they had beaten up a person who had attacked the director of the National Memory Institute.<sup>117</sup> C14 openly propagates violence against political opponents and minority groups by posting pictures of violent attacks on social media. In January 2018, C14 conducted a series of attacks against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and affiliated journalist organizations.<sup>118</sup> C14 also engages in nonviolent action, like protests against corruption and local construction projects, and works to defend Ukrainian “language security” (that is, using the Ukrainian language in public). Far-right groups’ membership mostly consists of physically fit men, many of whom have had combat experience.

Other civil society groups, including values-based conservatives, keep well clear of the far-right radicals. Although far-right groups are extremely visible—not least because of frequent media reports on their radical actions—they do not seem to enjoy a huge amount of popular support. According to polls, none of the far-right parties can come close to overcoming the 5 percent threshold to enter the Ukrainian parliament.<sup>119</sup> However, far right groups seem to be protected by the state from being prosecuted for violence.<sup>120</sup> Many allege that they cooperate with and receive support from security and law enforcement agencies, although it remains unclear to what extent the authorities control far-right movements.

## Conclusion

The two strands of conservative society are entwined with two sets of debates: one about Ukraine’s ideational convergence with the EU, the other about Ukraine’s national resilience. Mainstream conservative groups reflect a polarization around competing visions of moral values. More worryingly, radical right-wing groups menace Ukraine’s democracy and statehood. They propagate and justify political violence against “others” who are seen to endanger the nation. Even though their extreme views may not have widespread support,<sup>121</sup> their radical actions attract supporters who are frustrated that peaceful civic activism is not bringing quick political change. State authorities seem to tolerate these groups and offer them a protective cloak of impunity. Yet the same groups radicalize youth and attract the attention of foreign agencies interested in overthrowing Ukrainian democratic institutions and stirring up chaos. In this sense, the ongoing radicalization of civil society under the conditions of a weak state is one of the main domestic threats not only to democracy but to national security—the inverse of rightists’ nationalist goals.

# ISLAMIC CIVIL SOCIETY IN TURKEY

Özge Zihnioglu

In Turkey, the prominence of conservative civil society has become visible mainly through the rise of Islamic organizations. Although Islamic civil society organizations (CSOs) have long been present in Turkey, previous governments prior to the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AKP) administration were relatively hostile to them. Considered a threat to foundational Kemalist secular aims, these organizations kept a low profile and concentrated on activities directed at their own communities. Since the early 2000s, existing Islamic organizations began to adopt a higher profile and new Islamic actors began to appear. As the AKP has entrenched its power, Islamic organizations have come to make up a considerable part of Turkish civil society.

Other forms of conservative civil society are not nearly so prominent in Turkey. Traditional nationalist groups, such as the Idealist Hearths and Alperen Hearths, have been active for many years and are organized nationwide, often working in close proximity with nationalist parties. To date, the impact of these groups has generally been limited to their constituencies, although a strand of conservative nationalism is now gaining more traction across the country. Secular conservative groups, which have long sought to preserve the secular-based Kemalist order, were active into the 2000s. They actively took part in the 2007 Republic Protests, mass rallies that were organized on the eve of the controversial presidential election and in support of state secularism. However, these groups have been in decline, and their activism has waned as the AKP has consolidated its power, especially since the turn of the decade.

## Traditional Actors of Islamic Civil Society

Faced with a dominant, secular-based Kemalist ideology, for a long time Turkey's Islamic CSOs organized to preserve, sustain, and transfer Islamic identity and beliefs to successive generations. Informal Islamic education was at the heart of their efforts. They organized different activities—including Quran courses, religious conversations, and lectures—for different sectors of society. As AKP rule has shifted the balance of power away from the secular elite, Islamic civil society has become more ambitious and prominent. These organizations and their activities no longer clash with the system, but rather are in harmony with it.<sup>122</sup>

Islamic CSOs also have widely engaged in charity work. This is not surprising, considering that the Turkish public mainly associates civil society with philanthropy, relief work, and social services. In addition, many people see the act of giving as a religious requirement, which consequently increases the support base for CSO outreach efforts. Most of the Islamic charities work in traditional religious communities, which are considered the most important basis of Islamic CSOs in Turkey. These communities stem from a religious order or particular group, and bring people together around a leader or focus on a specific text. After a 1925 law restricted the activities of religious orders, these groups established associations and foundations to continue their work.<sup>123</sup>

An increasing number of Islamic organizations have an international focus. Today, several Turkish Islamic charities work at the international level. They deliver aid to Muslims in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and cooperate with charities in different parts of the world. In addition, some of these charities, like the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief, promote fundamental freedoms and carry out advocacy work along with humanitarian aid.

Organizations that provide traditional religious services, including the construction and renovation of mosques and other religious facilities and places of worship, are another large group within Islamic civil society. In recent years, the number of these organizations has increased dramatically. According to official figures from the Department of Associations, more than 18,000 associations now provide religious services—around 16 percent of all associations, which makes them the third-largest civil society grouping in Turkey after professional and solidarity organizations and sports organizations.<sup>124</sup>

## A New Period for Islamic Civil Society

The major turning point for Islamic civil society came with the AKP's electoral victory in 2002. As the AKP continued with the country's broadly neoliberal economic policies, it used Islamic charities and philanthropic associations to provide social assistance as a replacement for state welfare. This led to a new partnership between the government and charities, which had a profound effect on Islamic CSOs.<sup>125</sup> The charitable work of these

organizations increased extensively. Once considered a threat by the ruling elite and the state, Islamic CSOs came to be seen as indispensable partners in the implementation of state policies. In addition, some of these organizations were granted better access to public funds and closer relations with public institutions.<sup>126</sup> In response, they became more visible in the public sphere. Further, the Islamic-oriented entrepreneurial and business groups that emerged in Anatolia in the 1990s grew stronger under AKP rule. The new capital provided by these organizations started financing some Islamic CSOs. Islamic organizations shifted from traditional community support to a greater reliance on business donations and public funds.<sup>127</sup>

In addition more socially conservative Islamic CSOs are also spreading their activism. For instance, CSO Turkey Family Platform brings together different CSOs to protect and lobby for the institution of the family. An even larger initiative is the Union of NGOs of the Islamic World. With over 300 member NGOs from sixty-three countries, this group runs several projects, including capacity development for Islamic CSOs, improving the institution of the family, and coordinating Islamic CSOs' humanitarian aid to Syria. In defending their values, Islamic CSOs sometimes clash with other sectors of society. In 2013, seventy-four conservative organizations issued a written public announcement following the Istanbul Pride Parade. The announcement stated that some of the publicly broadcasted placards and images of parade attendees violated moral codes, and the announcement called on the Press Council and the Council of Ethics in Media to do their job.<sup>128</sup>

Equally significant is the emergence of new Islamic groups that usually mobilize around a cause rather than being rooted in a traditional religious community. One of these groups is the so-called Islamic left. In general terms, the Islamic left champions religion-based criticism of the AKP's neoliberal economic policies. Islamic leftists argue for economic and social justice, claiming that the AKP's neoliberal policies fail to provide either. On May 1, 2012, the Association for the Struggle Against Capitalism (more commonly known as the Anticapitalist Muslims) marched from Fatih Mosque to Taksim Square, two iconic sites in Istanbul. They also participated in the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Other Islamic leftist groups, such as the Labor and Justice Platform, avoid controversial public acts, choosing instead to issue statements and host debates regarding the AKP's social and economic policies.<sup>129</sup>

Over the past decade, new Islamic nationalist groups also have emerged. These groups have gained more visibility since the failed coup attempt in 2016. Despite their recent formation, groups such as the Ottoman Hearths, Ak Hearths,<sup>130</sup> and People Special Operations are well organized all around the country and attract large crowds. They are categorized as associations, the most common form of CSO in Turkey. Their nationalism has a neo-Ottoman focus, frequently using Ottoman emblems, logos, and symbols. More broadly, they emphasize national unity and solidarity with references to Islam. They all emphasize their independence from political parties. However, their activities and statements give open support to the AKP's

policies, show intolerance to their critics, and praise President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; they also visit and are visited by AKP officials. They have been linked to actions against certain CSOs and political party headquarters.<sup>131</sup> Given their militarist discourse, these groups often are described as militias.<sup>132</sup>

Other new actors are more progressive. They challenge Islam's dominant practices in daily life. An important example is the rise of Islamic women's groups, made up of women who want to participate equally in daily life without abandoning their Islamic identity. Religiously motivated rights-based women's movements and organizations are not new in Turkey. Earlier groups that had been active during the late 1990s and early 2000s were mobilized around the headscarf issue, after veiled students were banned from entering classes. Unlike these earlier groups, however, the new actors do not challenge state authority. Instead, they target specific issues in Turkish society. For instance, the Working Ladies' Association lobbies for working women's rights and provides solidarity in support of women's issues, but at the same time aims to improve society's moral and ethical quality. Some others contest the place and actions of Muslim men. An interesting example is the "Women at Mosques" campaign.<sup>133</sup> These women challenge the patriarchal model in mosques, where women's segregated spaces are small, unwelcoming, and difficult to access. When one woman was kicked out of a mosque and shamed by the imam because she was not sitting in the women's segregated space, her friends attended a Friday prayer in the same spot to protest. These women regularly go to mosques together to pray and to discuss how to improve women's place in mosques. Women's groups are also active on broader societal issues such as violence toward women. The Muslims Initiative Against Violence Toward Women, for instance, aims to bring Islamic discourse and perspective to efforts to prevent violence against women.

These new actors are small in numbers and often are seen as marginal. However, they have introduced a new discourse in Islamic civil society. Although politicized Islamic groups have existed since the early 1990s, in earlier periods, they mobilized mainly against the secular establishment. These new groups, especially the Islamic left and some women's organizations, critique dominant Islamic practices from within, reflecting and embodying a more heterogeneous Islamic civil society. In stressing cross-cutting issues, like violence against women or social and economic policies, they offer a venue for dialogue in Turkey's increasingly polarized society.

## Conclusion

Islamic civil society has been expanding rapidly in Turkey over the past decade. Its numbers and fields of activity have grown considerably. The Islamic-oriented AKP's rule no doubt has contributed to this growth. Not only has this expansion boosted the self-confidence of Islamic groups but, more importantly, Islamic CSOs increasingly have benefited from the opportunities provided by the AKP's hold on power. These groups now enjoy easier access to public projects and funding as well as money coming from also-growing conservative capital. In turn, these groups reinforce the AKP's social and economic policies. Islamic charities help

supplement the public welfare system, while other groups focus on family or education to complement the AKP's conservative restructuring of Turkish society.

This implicit alliance with the AKP is likely to make Islamic CSOs dependent on the party for their continued prosperity and survival. That said, many would exist in the absence of AKP rule, much as several secular organizations continue their work today. However, their increasing reliance on the state for funding and legitimacy transforms these organizations' relations with their base. These relations traditionally have been characterized by strong community bonds; in the past, Islamic actors generally operated in closed structures, carrying out activities directed uniquely at their own communities. As these Islamic CSOs have developed in recent years, they have expanded their activities to new populations. However, these organizations may still have an exclusionary attitude in their relations with so-called others outside of Islamic civil society. In the coming years, it will be important to see whether they establish relations with other sectors of civil society.

The Islamic discourse of liberation from the Kemalist order is giving way to new discourses and groups within Islamic civil society. These new groups still define themselves with references to Islam, but they are not necessarily conservative in their demands. Nor do they automatically stand with the AKP. Although they make themselves heard, they have only limited numbers of supporters. On their own, their place in Islamic civil society may remain marginal. The future direction of Islamic civil society depends on the new generation of Islamic actors. Unlike earlier players, the new generation does not aim merely to preserve Islamic identity but rather seeks better access to modern life. Therefore, even though they are still religious, they may also challenge conservative norms in some other dimensions. Much depends on how these new actors choose to contribute to Islamic civil society.

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# **NATIVISTS VERSUS GLOBAL LIBERALISM IN GEORGIA**

Ghia Nodia

Conservative civil society in Georgia can be described as nativist. It comprises organizations and groups claiming to fight for the preservation of the country's religious and ethno-nationalist identities. Some of these organizations claim to be linked to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Their presence and influence have visibly grown during the last decade. The liberal West as well as local pro-western political and civil society groups constitute the primary objects of their resentment, though they also feel threatened by visitors and business from Muslim countries. While only some of the groups are openly pro-Russian, others may be supported by Russia and many of their claims echo the Kremlin's anti-Western propaganda. Some of these groups also use violent tactics.

## **The Sorosians and Their Enemies**

Most Georgians first became aware of civil society in the early 1990s as something related to Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros. In response to the collapse of the Soviet system, Soros created a network of foundations supporting civil society in formerly communist countries. While other organizations did this kind of work as well, Soros became the popular generic name in Georgia (like Xerox for copying machines or Kleenex for facial tissues) for Western democracy-promoting foundations, and civil society was understood to be a network of people who got funding from Soros. Consequently, these people came to be called Sorosians—at least, by those who did not like them.

“Anti-Sorosian” may be the best way to describe groups that fall under the heading of conservative civil society in Georgia. They emerged largely as a backlash against the norms and institutions associated with this new civil society. While the Sorosians advocated a distinctly positive agenda, the anti-Sorosians drew their energy from resentment—their ethos is akin to that of a resistance movement.

What were they resisting? Following the demise of the Soviet order, communism was replaced by the new discourse of democracy and human rights. Georgian society generally welcomed this change, but few people had a distinct idea of what these norms and institutions actually meant. New civil society organizations specialized in interpreting and advocating for these new ideas and norms for the Georgian reality. Hence, among the wider public, they came to be identified with the new dominant ideology. This civil society network attracted mostly young, urban, educated people who were genuinely fascinated by Western liberal ideas. (They also might have been attracted by chances to obtain Western funding—something their ill-wishers never forgot to ridicule them for.) However, this milieu was socially too thin to develop into an independent social force, even though it gradually expanded over the years. Its overdependence on the support of Western donors remained its structural weakness. Nevertheless, its informal status as interpreter-in-chief of the new dominant ideology made it disproportionately influential. Close cooperation and eventual integration with the West was the centerpiece of Georgian foreign policy, and all mainstream parties shared the dominant political project of becoming a European-style democracy. No government could fully ignore messages coming from civil society, not least because these groups also had strong ties to mainstream media.

Moreover, this organized civil society exercised influence by sending its representatives to the government. This became especially salient in the period of United National Movement (UNM) rule between 2004 and 2012, when the most important drivers of reform came from the nongovernmental organization (NGO) community. The government of the Georgian Dream party, in power since 2012, has been more diverse, but it has continued, in part, the tradition of appointing prominent civil society activists to government positions. This did not mean that different Georgian governments genuinely followed Western practices of democracy and rule of law, but all of them recognized these norms as their chief point of reference. As a result, according to the anti-Sorosians, the civil society sector set the agenda of change in Georgian society and eventually came to power. To their opponents, civil society groups were local agents of global liberalism, whose forces had taken control of Georgia—and they had to be resisted.

## The Agenda

Nativist civil society may not be as articulate and consistent as its Sorosian counterpart, but it has several distinct guiding themes. The central theme is the imagined disjuncture between Western or global liberalism and authentic Georgian culture and identity. In the words of

Levan Vasadze, one of the chief ideologues of Georgian nativism, “In the same way in which we used to be occupied by the communist ideology, we are now occupied by the liberal ideology.”<sup>134</sup> In a popular phrase, forces of global liberalism conspire to “deprive us of our Georgian-ness.” Although local Sorosian intellectuals and activists are alleged agents of this conspiracy, in the demonology of nativist civil society, the UNM and its leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, were at the heart of this destructive force. To nativists, the UNM’s period in power under Saakashvili was not merely autocratic—quite a few of Saakashvili’s liberal critics would agree with this assessment—but an alien occupying regime.

What is this so-called Georgian-ness that global liberalism wants to destroy? Nativists have never presented a single coherent concept of their project, but the most important perceived threats are seen in areas of sexuality and traditional family relations. Homosexuality is the foremost threat: the most popular figure of speech is that the liberal West wants to turn “us”—or, it is sometimes specified, “our children”—into “pederasts” (in Georgian, this is expressed by the single word *gagvapidaraston*). From this line of thinking comes the popular denomination of liberals as *liberasti*—tellingly, this turn of phrase borrows from Russian vocabulary.<sup>135</sup> The most emblematic demonstration of the power of nativist civil society in reaction to this perceived threat took place in May 2013, when a huge crowd led by Orthodox priests attacked a small public performance in support of LGBT rights, forcing police to rescue the performers and those who had come to support them.<sup>136</sup> Since then, the Georgian Orthodox Church has declared May 17 as “defense of the family day.” Along with the threat posed by homosexuality, female chastity—or the “institution of virginity” (the prohibition of sex before marriage)—is another expression of so-called true Georgian-ness that is under attack by forces of global liberalism.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity, rather than the general Christian religion, is considered the stronghold of true Georgian-ness and, according to nativist civil society, it is being targeted by the forces of Western liberalism. The West attacks the Orthodox faith both by promoting atheism and promiscuity and by supporting the proselytizing efforts of Western Protestant sects.<sup>137</sup> As a result, nativist groups are often associated with the church and are sometimes led by activist clergy or present themselves as allies and defenders of the true faith.

Conventional xenophobia is another popular expression of the nativist mindset. Paradoxically, however, it is targeted not against Westerners but mostly against Muslims. This fear appeals to references in Georgian history: until it was annexed to Russia in the nineteenth century, Georgia was dominated by the Muslim Ottoman and Persian empires—the ethnically Georgian but religiously Muslim population in the autonomous region of Adjara is a legacy of that time. For Georgian nativists, only Orthodox Christians can be true Georgians, so Islam is a threat to Georgian identity. This creates religious tension in Adjara and some other regions of Georgia where Adjarian Muslims were resettled during the last several decades. Moreover, Georgia’s liberal economic policies, especially since 2004, have attracted a number of investors from Muslim-majority countries like Turkey, Iran, and Arab states. Many restaurants, bars, and other businesses from those countries are patronized primarily by Muslim visitors.

All of these factors make the perceived problem of Muslims in Georgia qualitatively different from that faced by rich Western countries, where refugees fleeing war and poverty may be seen as a drain on national budgets. In Georgia, they are a source of investment. Nevertheless, this situation does not stop Georgian nativists from expressing fear of and resentment toward Muslims, regardless of their nationality.

## The Geopolitical Dimension

Most nativist groups deny being pro-Russian and describe themselves as defenders of Georgian cultural values, though some of them openly call for a closer alliance with Russia. In a country that has an ongoing territorial conflict with Russia, it ought to be damaging to be considered an ally of the aggressor. Liberal critics of these nativist groups routinely define them as pro-Russian or Russia's fifth column, while analysts tend to describe them as a tools of Russia's "sharp power."<sup>138</sup>

How real and important is this Russian link? There are two parts to this inquiry: Are these actors directly (such as financially) supported by Russia? And how pro-Russian are they in their agenda? When it comes to the first question, analysts insist that there is at least circumstantial evidence of some groups being actual beneficiaries of Russian support.<sup>139</sup> However, it is the link between ideas and agendas that constitutes the better yardstick.

Almost everyone in Georgia recognizes that Russia is an aggressive imperial power occupying 20 percent of the country's territory, specifically the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, nativists typically excuse Russian behavior by saying that all great powers are inherently imperialist and Russia is no different. According to one popular dictum, "Twenty percent of Georgia is occupied by Russia, but the other 80 percent is occupied by the United States." According to their argument, a small country like Georgia does not have the choice to be fully politically sovereign; rather, it may only choose which outside power dominates it. In this framing of the problem, Russia may be the preferred choice, as it shares a religion and has been actively fighting the threat of aggressive Western liberalism. Moreover, it is often hinted that the conflict with Russia, deplorable as it is, is actually the result of a Western conspiracy that used Georgia—as well as Ukraine—to weaken Russia. The nativists' logic is that if Georgia refuses to play the West's dirty games, then its conflicts with Russia, including the territorial ones, may be solved.

By presenting Western liberalism as a threat to authentic Georgian culture, nativists share the core thrust of Russian propaganda. They also openly or tacitly recognize Russia as the leader of the international resistance movement against this ideological and cultural aggression. Only Russia can protect Eastern Orthodox religious tradition from destruction, which is an alleged motive of global Western-liberal conspiracy. Ideologues of Russian anti-Westernism

and illiberalism, such as Alexander Dugin, are the direct inspiration for many Georgian nativists, and quite a few groups have direct contacts with Dugin's Eurasian movement. Whether Georgian nativists advocate this because they benefit from Russian funding or because there is a genuine meeting of kindred souls is an open question.

## The Actors

The Georgian Orthodox Church may be considered the foremost actor of conservative or nativist civil society in Georgia. The church is a historically dominant religious organization in Georgia that went through a spectacular renaissance after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, establishing itself as by far the most formidable moral power in Georgia. The level of trust given to the church far surpasses faith in any other Georgian public institution.<sup>140</sup> Yet the variety of opinions within the church, and the resulting internal disagreements, are becoming increasingly public. Its official position, expressed by its holy synod, is that the church supports Georgia's policy of European integration. However, the largest and most influential part of the church has close contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church, which is an active agent of Russia's anti-Western propaganda efforts. Many high- and middle-level clergy are vocal critics of Western liberalism and often openly support pro-Russian policies. It is widely believed in the Georgian analytical community that the church is the main purveyor of Russian soft power in Georgia.<sup>141</sup>

Until the August 2008 war with Russia, no political party of any influence contested Georgia's pro-Western path and everyone at least paid lip service to liberal values. Since 2009, the taboo has been broken, with several political parties trying to capitalize on anti-Western sentiment. The Alliance of Patriots Georgia (APG) was the first such party to clear the 5 percent threshold and enter the Georgian Parliament in October 2016.

A number of NGOs present themselves as advocates of Orthodox values allegedly threatened by Western influence. The Union of Orthodox Parents is the most famous of these groups, and has earned notoriety through its readiness to use violent methods to disrupt events that it deems inappropriate for Georgia's culture and traditions. Other groups, like the Eurasian Institute, are more vocal in resisting Georgia's policies of European and transatlantic integration, preferring Eurasian integration instead. These groups have a network of active online media like [geworld.ge](http://geworld.ge) and others, and are probably beneficiaries of direct Russian aid.<sup>142</sup>

Among the media, the *Asaval-Dasavali* weekly newspaper, one of the most popular print publications in Georgia, may be the most influential organization spreading aggressively xenophobic and illiberal messages. Objektivi TV and Radio, linked to APG, has a similar mindset in its broadcasting and specializes in a more general criticism of Western-style liberalism in Georgia.

Finally, a number of more aggressively xenophobic, quasi-fascist organizations have been protesting the increasing number of foreigners and foreign-owned businesses, especially draw-

ing on anti-Muslim sentiment to do so. One group, Georgian March, has organized several public events of this type and may be the most important of these xenophobic organizations.

## **The Dynamics**

In recent years, nativist groups and organizations have begun to proliferate for several reasons. One reason is political. The 2012 elections brought to power the Georgian Dream coalition (and later political party) created by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Georgian billionaire who made his fortune in Russia. This political force has generally pursued pro-Western policies; in 2014, it signed an Association Agreement with the European Union. However, it has also flirted with nativist groups, including some of their representatives in its rank, and even indirectly subsidizing aggressively illiberal, anti-Western media. One possible explanation may be that it needs political support from these groups against their common enemy: the UNM, which continues to be the main opposition force.

The rise of nativist civil society may be considered a backlash against reforms carried out by the UNM government from 2004 to 2012. These reforms brought many benefits to Georgia; among other things, it created a functional state and helped root out endemic corruption. However, the UNM's policies also meant that many lost power and status, and the top-down, aggressive way the government carried out its reforms created grounds for accusations of authoritarianism. As the UNM government was generally supported by the West and prioritized European and NATO integration, using it as a tool to legitimize its often-unpopular reforms, it was easy for nativist ideologues to take advantage of grievances created by the UNM policies and present these policies as an expression of Western liberal domination.<sup>143</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Georgia's nativist surge appears to be a part of a global zeitgeist. In the case of Georgia, this trend is driven by a mix of internal and external factors—that is, by domestic political competition compounded by the long shadow of Russian influence. How exactly the international environment influences Georgia in this regard is not fully clear, but it is obvious that Russia, Georgia's most powerful neighbor, has stepped up efforts to support similar movements in many countries. Its increasing presence in Georgia may help sustain the conservative backlash for some time. For a country where liberal, pro-Western, and pro-democratic NGOs gained such a notable presence, this turnaround in civil society identities is of major significance and its effects have been underestimated.

# **FREEDOM TO EXCLUDE: CONSERVATIVE CSOS IN LAW AND JUSTICE POLAND**

Paweł Marczewski

The recent development of conservative civil society in Poland is integrally linked to the actions that the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS) party has taken since it won power in 2015. The PiS government has created a new political context designed to favor certain civil society organizations (CSOs). The main institutional framework for this change is the creation of a National Institute of Freedom – the Center for the Development of Civil Society (NIW), affiliated with the office of the prime minister. This organization has replaced the Fund for Civic Initiatives, which was managed by the Ministry of Social Policy and previously served as the main body distributing public money to Polish CSOs. The change is not purely organizational; it is a symbolic gesture stressing the importance of civil society to the new government. It also signals that the PiS government wants to wield the power of civil society to advance its policy goals and conservative values—all under the guise of broadening access to public funding and government support for CSOs.

Minister of Culture and National Heritage Piotr Gliński, a professor of sociology whose academic career focused on the study of Polish civil society, was the main proponent of creating the NIW. He explained the government's intentions at a November 2016 press conference: "Our goal is to provide all Polish civil society organizations with an equal access to public funds."<sup>144</sup> The conference was meant to dismantle a potential conflict with CSOs. Not long before this press statement, a government-controlled public television channel had aired a clip aimed at discrediting some CSOs run by family members of PiS political opponents, including Zofia Komorowska, daughter of former Polish president Bronisław Komorowski,

and Róża Rzeplińska, daughter of the former chairman of the Constitutional Court. The television clip claimed that these individuals and organizations had benefited from disproportionate amounts of public funding. Gliński's announcement was intended to assuage potential criticism by arguing that the government was merely trying to solve CSOs' systemic problems.

However, his efforts were undermined by then prime minister Beata Szydło, who stated that "we are constantly criticized for not building civil society, but the government supports its development with millions of złoty. Unfortunately it often occurs that the beneficiaries are controlled by the politicians of the previous governing clique."<sup>145</sup>

For Szydło, "providing equal access" translated into cutting public funds for organizations affiliated in any way with PiS's political rivals—a move that at least partially undermined the political credibility of his argument.

Nevertheless, conservative CSOs have used this statement to justify their support for the government's policies toward Polish civil society, as well as their attempts to limit both funding and potential avenues of public influence for their ideological opponents. The argument about the necessity of "providing equal access" has become a potent tool used to criticize organizations that do not share the government's policy goals, as well as those whose agenda does not comply with conservative values. It has allowed conservative CSOs to attack their rivals on issues such as patriotism, gender, family, and reproductive rights while maintaining the formal appearance of democratic pluralism. In other words, emboldened by the government, these organizations have attempted to push their values forward not by questioning democracy, but rather by insisting that their actions represent a necessary correction of democratic process.

## **Self-Proclaimed Victims**

The dominant narrative among Polish conservative CSOs is the one of victimhood. As some conservative intellectuals have argued, anticommunist activists and dissidents were responsible in part for importing the idea of civil society to Poland, regarding it as a means of recreating civic bonds after years of a "sociological vacuum" under communist rule.<sup>146</sup> As the Polish communist party had subsumed or controlled almost all institutions of public life for nearly half a century, the dissidents could not refer to any local concept for civil society and had to look elsewhere. Western experts and policy advisers came up with the handy notion of civil society, adjusted for the nascent Central European democracies. For conservatives this entailed a cost, as it meant that a broad spectrum of traditional self-organization in Poland (for example, women's groups in rural areas) was deemed not modern or professional enough and, in effect, was left out of civic support programs.<sup>147</sup> Considered from this perspective, "providing equal access" to public funds for all CSOs would be a means of correcting an historical injustice and bringing to power political forces that postcommunist activists and liberals allegedly marginalized after 1989.

New conservative CSOs and ones reinvigorated by PiS's ascent to power have combined this historical narrative of exclusion with the more modern trope that liberal and left-wing civic organizations were generously funded both by private and public money in order to promote a vision of society contrary to most Poles' wishes and traditions. The symbolic figure connecting these earlier injustices with modern democratic maladies, such as immigration and multiculturalism, is the billionaire investor George Soros. As conservative Catholic columnist Grzegorz Górný remarked of Soros in an essay for the weekly *wSieci*, one of the magazines that strongly supports the government, "This declared atheist and enemy of strong national identities supports—both in America and in Europe—different organizations promoting abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, and sterilization. Thanks to his money and influence, he attempts to push the world in a worrying direction."<sup>148</sup>

Soros is an enemy figure not specific to Poland. Many right-wing and conservative movements and politicians point to him as the archetypical promoter of all things that, in their opinion, corrupt modern democracies. Yet Polish conservatives have adapted the anti-Soros theme to their native political discourse. Instead of arguing that certain conservative values, such as opposing abortion or same-sex marriages, are supported by a majority of Poles, they claim that Polish public life discriminates against, excludes, or even persecutes conservative values. One example of this mindset appears in a report published by the conservative parents' organization Fundacja Mamy i Taty (Mother and Father Foundation) titled *Against Freedom and Democracy: The Political Strategy of the LGBT Lobby in Poland and Around the World*. The report categorizes various antidiscrimination campaigns undertaken by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists as the "tyranny of a minority." Moreover, its authors describe an alleged "global strategy" of pushing an LGBT agenda in three steps: immunizing public opinion by presenting gay people in casual, everyday contexts and styling them as "victims of society"; demanding legal protections and antidiscrimination laws; and, finally, stigmatizing opponents as aggressive homophobes.<sup>149</sup>

Ironically, these three steps—self-victimization, demanding protective antidiscrimination laws, and stigmatizing opponents as intolerant—are the essence of the new strategy that conservative CSOs use to push their own agenda. Here, the narrative of historical injustice—dating back to the beginnings of Poland's transition to democracy—meets modern conservative fears of dismantling traditional gender roles and dissolving national cultures.

## Three Types of Conservative CSOs in Poland

The change of government after the 2015 elections heralded a new political climate that promoted and rewarded CSOs allied to the official political line. The government sent CSOs clear signals to that effect. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs selected only conservative organizations to organize "regional centers for international debates," a network of cultural and diplomatic institutions across the country tasked with raising awareness and educating the general public about foreign affairs and diplomacy.<sup>150</sup> An equally strong sign was

the Interior Ministry's decision to cut funding allocated from the Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration to organizations working with refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>151</sup> As the Polish government remained reluctant to accept European Union quotas on refugee allocation, such organizations became undesirable partners.

These new financial and political incentives, along with Gliński's announcements that public funds would be more equally distributed among CSOs, prompted conservative organizations to form an official umbrella organization, the Polish Republic Confederation of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) (Konfederacja Inicjatyw Pozarządowych Rzeczypospolitej, or KIPR). The KIPR was created as an alternative to the existing Polish Forum of NGOs (Ogólnopolskie Forum Organizacji Pozarządowych), which contained a wider range of organizations with varying degrees of political engagement and different ideological leanings. A closer look at the organizations that compose KIPR reveals some important differences in their agenda and strategies. They can be grouped into three general categories: policy influencers, memory shapers, and social conservers.

Policy influencers are first and foremost interested in legislation. They concentrate on strategic litigation and overseeing the legislative process, occasionally coming up with their own drafts of laws. Their goal is to sway the legal system in a conservative direction, such as penalizing abortion, limiting antidiscrimination organizations access to schools (particularly in the case of organizations focusing on LGBT issues), or securing the right of Catholics to publicly express or act on their views. The most illustrative example is the legal think tank Ordo Iuris. This organization became known to the broader Polish public in 2016 when it led the efforts of a civic committee called Stop Abortion. It tried to push for the adoption of a draconian law that would prosecute and even imprison women who terminated a pregnancy, even one that resulted from rape.<sup>152</sup> When the project reached parliament, it triggered massive nationwide protests and, in response to this public pressure, the ruling party rejected it.

Memory shapers are less interested in legal changes. Rather, they focus their efforts on preserving cultural heritage and cultivating a patriotic—in some cases, nationalist—version of Polish history and tradition. Examples of memory shapers associated with KIPR include the Three Dots Association (Stowarzyszenie Trzy Kropki), Normal Culture (Normalna Kultura), and Service to the Independent Poland (Służba Niepodległej). Some of these CSOs, like Three Dots, seem to have been created in direct response to the new political context, with the primary aim of securing public funds allocated for promotion of values important to the government. Three Dots was registered as an association in February 2017 but, by May, it had already won a large grant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs within the framework of the public diplomacy program.<sup>153</sup> Other organizations, like Odra-Niemen, existed for some years before PiS came to power, but their agenda—in this case, helping Polish diasporas in Belarus and Ukraine and cultivating memory about combatants of the Polish Homeland Army in World War II—was a good match for the government's historical politics.

Social conservers combine elements of the two aforementioned types. They occasionally have become involved in the legislative process by organizing referenda aimed at countering unwelcomed proposals, but their main goal is raising public awareness and education. This group of CSOs focuses predominantly on families and their relations with the state, which is often perceived as oppressive and patronizing. One of KIPR's founders, the group Stop Manipulation, defines as its main goal as "direct help to victims of judicial failures, particularly falsely accused of domestic violence or sexual crimes."<sup>154</sup> Stop Manipulation focuses primarily on alleged mistakes and misuses of psychology in family courts; other social conservers not affiliated with KIPR (but supported financially by the government) look at family-state relations from a much broader angle. A prominent example of this type of organization is the Parents' Ombudsman (Rzecznik Praw Rodziców), created by social activists Tomasz and Karolina Elbanowscy. They were particularly vocal critics of the previous government's plan to extend compulsory school education to six-year-olds. The PiS government reversed this decision, as well as the system of two-tier primary education, and the Parents' Ombudsman foundation became an official social and consulting partner of the Ministry of Education. Currently, it has issued official statements on a range of issues, from the shape and weight of schoolbags to the benefits of the PiS government's flagship social program to combat Poland's declining birthrate, 500+.<sup>155</sup> It also runs a support line for parents who are in danger of having their children taken away.<sup>156</sup> Social conservers may vary in scope of interest and extent of financial support from the government, but they are linked by a common denominator: deep mistrust in state institutions' authority to oversee and regulate family relations.

## Using Democracy Against Itself

Within the universe of conservative Polish CSOs, an overarching dividing line distinguishes the newcomers from the veterans. The latter seem to be using familiar, tried-and-true methods and techniques, as in the case of the Odra-Niemen association promoting a specific vision of Polish history and organizing fundraisers and educational activities to provide assistance to Poles who were not repatriated from Belarus or Ukraine after World War II. Their values and goals merely happen to be in accordance with the historical narrative of the current government so they, and similar CSOs, benefit from the current political situation.

The newcomers, by contrast, use very different language and have a much more ambitious agenda. A good illustration of this ambition was Ordo Iuris's decision to represent Catholic philosopher and columnist Tomasz Terlikowski in his legal challenge against the Warsaw Medical University. When Terlikowski, a vocal opponent of abortion, was dismissed from his duties as an instructor of philosophy and bioethics by the university, he decided to take the university to court. Ordo Iuris argued on his behalf that his dismissal was a case of religious discrimination. According to the organization's chairman, Jerzy Kwaśniewski, "We would like to show that European Union regulations limiting the free market can become a weapon in fighting against discrimination of people adhering to Christian values. Maybe it will

force Polish and European politicians to rethink their attempts at further limiting freedom of speech and free market in the name of ideologically motivated antidiscrimination.”<sup>157</sup>

One can question what the free market has to do with antiabortion views, but Kwaśniewski’s statement reveals something important about the new type of populist conservative CSOs operating in Poland: they not only benefit from a favorable political context but aim to change the political playing field altogether. Their goal is to use democratic institutions, procedures, and values—such as referenda, civic legislative proposals, and laws protecting freedom of speech and conscience—against democracy itself. In doing so, they advocate something closer to a tyranny of the majority than a more pluralistic system of coexisting views and lifestyles. Their language is full of pseudodemocratic promises to restore power to the people, but their concrete solutions effectively limit or eliminate pluralism.

# **THE CONSERVATIVE ALLIANCE AGAINST GENDER JUSTICE AND EQUALITY IN UGANDA**

Arthur Larok

In Uganda, conservative civil society is becoming more influential. In a recent and notable example of this trend, conservative groups joined forces to defeat a proposed law to accord equitable rights to women over marriage and divorce. Their campaign was striking because Christian and Muslims united against the bill. Politicians from different parties in parliament united as well, and even some women legislators opposed the law. The defeat left Uganda's women's movement and allies shell-shocked, as they seek to overcome yet another setback in a nearly five-decade struggle for gender equality. This specific example of conservative civil society's rising influence demonstrates several key lessons that are of broader relevance for civic activism.

Efforts to liberalize Uganda's marriage laws go back many decades. Conservatives have mobilized against each successive iteration. In 2013, a multi-actor conservative movement defeated what was then called the Marriage and Divorce Bill. Now, the bill has been reintroduced in parliament as the Marriage Bill. The proposals have been watered down in an effort to get some conservative groups on board.

## **The New Proposals**

The stated objective of the Marriage and Divorce Bill was to reform and consolidate the laws governing marriage, providing for different types of marriages, marital rights, and duties arising from marriage. It covered a range of issues, including prohibiting marriage before the age

of 18, prohibiting same-sex marriages, banning widow inheritance (the cultural practice in which a man may “inherit” the wife of a deceased male relative) without the free consent of the widow, in addition to stipulating acceptable grounds for divorce. The bill also appeared to undercut the customary payment of a bride price as the first step toward marriage, making bride price optional and outlawing the practice of returning marriage gifts upon the dissolution of the marriage. It introduced other significant areas of legal reform, including property rights in marriage and cohabiting relationships, along with the concept of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage being the sole ground for a divorce petition (as opposed to requiring one petitioner to prove a matrimonial offense such as adultery, cruelty, or desertion).

Conservative civil society groups opposed most of these measures. They were not hostile merely to the specifics of the bill but also to its broader social ramifications. The Marriage and Divorce Bill was fundamentally about dignity, justice, and equality before, during, and after marriage. Consequently, it was also seen as a wider attack against patriarchy, which is still dominant in Uganda. The bill reflected a societal evolution that would affect traditionally held conservative values, institutions, and monopolies. This shift posed a threat to institutions that consider themselves to be custodians of tradition and culture, causing anxiety in some sections of these institutions over what their role would be if Ugandan law challenged some of the strongly guarded doctrines that accord them power and privileges.

## A Conservative Alliance

The three major groups in the conservative alliance against the Marriage and Divorce Bill were religious institutions, traditionalists, and supporters of the patriarchy. The Mother’s Union also held a conservative view but were not as active in the mobilization against the bill. The religious institutions—including Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim groups, their attendant constituencies, such as archdioceses around the country, and affiliated organizations, such as the Uganda Joint Christian Council and the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda—had major concerns centered around religious doctrines and beliefs on issues such as divorce and cohabitation. The traditionalists comprised cultural institutions and ethnic groupings who sought to maintain their relevance by defending cultural and social values. Their major concerns regarded cohabitation clauses, property rights, and the return of bride price after a failed marriage. Finally, the third group contained male chauvinistic and patriarchal individuals who were most concerned about women gaining property rights in formal marriages, cohabitation, and matters relating to conjugal rights. These relatively unstructured groups were led by mostly male members of parliament who reinforced patriarchal views at constituent and national levels.

*Religious conservatives:* Strong religious objections to the legislation came from Christians who drew on biblical teachings to vehemently oppose the clauses on cohabitation and divorce. Muslim leaders likewise drew upon the Quran to support their arguments. Opponents of the cohabitation clause justified their antipathy toward the practice by quoting the injunctions of religious texts as a principal rationale. They argued that cohabitation is morally wrong. Some

members of parliament likened cohabitation to outright prostitution and declared they would never support laws that encourage children to go against “church laws.”<sup>158</sup>

*Traditionalists:* To justify their opposition to the Marriage and Divorce Bill, some conservative groups argued for the need to protect traditional social values by upholding family unity and stability. Traditionalists opposed the practice of cohabitation and the idea of abolishing the return of bride price, which they consider one of the most important cultural mechanisms to confirm that a marriage had been dissolved. They also argued that the practice of widow inheritance was an important avenue through which women were protected and guaranteed care following the death of a husband. Traditionalists also agreed with Muslim religious conservatives that the proposed legislation should not cover polygamous marriages, which are still common in Uganda.

*Patriarchy:* Beyond the religious and traditional justifications that resonated with the diverse following of different groups, conservatives essentially feared losing power and privileges. For male chauvinists, it was inconceivable that a woman would be able to claim a legal right to matrimonial property, have a say regarding the next woman to join a polygamous marriage, or have a stake in co-owning property even though they came empty-handed into their union. The patriarchal notion that women come into marriage without any property and should receive nothing if they leave it was the epitome of abuse to the value women bring to marriages and the failure by society to recognize the immense contribution women make.

Fundamentally, the resistance and rejection of the Marriage and Divorce Bill was ultimately about protecting self and group interests, power, and privileges. For religious- and tradition-based conservatives, their custodianship of certain social norms and widely held doctrines were under threat.

## Mobilization Strategies

The conservative alliance against gender equality and justice deployed diverse tools to influence public discourse and give the impression that the proposed legislation was unpopular. These tactics included propaganda, deliberate distortions and misinformation, bribery, and, in some cases, threats about society’s disintegration.

The first and perhaps most widely used tactic to delegitimize the Marriage and Divorce Bill was conservative propaganda about the intentions behind it. It was presented as anti-African and elitist, a view remarkably contained in a letter that the president himself wrote to parliament, criticizing legislation that originated from his own government. He allegedly told the ruling party’s parliamentary caucus that “the white man can come in the country to do politics, but we shall not allow them to distort culture.”<sup>159</sup> This claim resonated with other critics who claimed that the bill was being promoted and funded by Westerners and that the whole agenda was against African culture and “seen as an unnecessary introduction of alien *white*

*man* cultures to further distill their already eroding cultures and customs.”<sup>160</sup> The men and women behind the legislation were accused of being gay or lesbians, and promoting homosexuality. This curiously implied that the bill’s drafters—the government of Uganda—were themselves agents of these “perverted ways of the West”!<sup>161</sup>

Similarly, an Anglican bishop authoritatively claimed that the proposed legislation was being promoted by a group of women whose marriages had failed. The bishop asserted the bill should be rejected, describing it as an effort by prostitutes to spoil the institution of marriage so that everyone would become a prostitute: “As a Church, we have learnt that this debate is being engineered by some women who have failed to stay in marriage and [are] surviving [as] prostitutes. Now they want to use that Bill so that many couples will join them in prostitution.”<sup>162</sup> He added that there is no divorce in the Bible and that Uganda had more important issues to deal with: “There are a lot of issues affecting development in the country which the [members of parliament] should focus on and debate how to improve them instead of wasting time to debate issues of divorces.”<sup>163</sup>

Second, some conservatives deliberately misinformed or distorted the essence of the legislation. For instance, they suggested that the widely used concept of marital rape would give women license to deny their husbands’ “conjugal rights” and grounds to sue if the men insisted on having sex—even though this was not proposed in the Marriage and Divorce Bill. These legislators did not bother to explain the circumstances under which conjugal rights could be denied in marriage or other unions as provided for in the bill, including poor health, surgery, childbirth, or “reasonable fear that engaging in sexual intercourse is likely to cause physical or psychological injury or harm.”<sup>164</sup>

Finally, conservative groups used patronage against the bill. In Uganda, it has become something of a norm to bribe members of parliament to pass or oppose legislation or support the preferred positions of the president. The executive previously has advanced money to members of parliament to pass unpopular legislative reforms such as the removal of presidential term limits in 2005 and the removal of the age limit to be president in Uganda from the constitution in 2017. In this instance, members of parliament were given 5 million Ugandan shillings to go out and talk with communities about the Marriage and Divorce Bill. However, they did not genuinely consult their electorate. Some held rallies and openly told their electorate that they opposed the bill because it would erode men’s integrity; others used the money to support savings and credit groups in their constituencies in open contravention of the intended purpose of the funds. This practice further affirmed the view that the bill was a waste of time and that other issues, in this case the economic empowerment of rural communities, were more important.

## Conclusions and Lessons

It is difficult to assess the strength or effectiveness of conservative civil society in Uganda unless the analysis is applied to a specific process, such as the Marriage and Divorce Bill. In this case, one can argue that it was quite effective compared to the human rights community that

sought wide-ranging reforms to existing practices. Beyond traditional conservative civil society—comprising religious, traditional and cultural institutions, and affiliated groups—other groups bent on maintaining their power and privilege emerged or were activated by conservative forces. Emergent groups like these are often temporary—they greatly bolster the strength of typical conservative civil society but quickly wither once their patrons withdraw money.

Uganda now faces the prospect of a conservative alliance that easily regroups each time a new iteration of the proposed family legislation is brought to parliament. They can continue to block efforts to address deep-rooted historical injustices against women. The convergence of interests between groups that do not ordinarily agree on other issues has wider significance for conservative civil society in Uganda. On their own, and in isolation, the groups that formed the conservative alliance would probably not have succeeded in shaping what was considered a populist public rejection of the bill. In a population that is not well informed on matters of legislation and is quite conservative—and therefore easily accepts propaganda about perceived social norms—it was not difficult to present such a bill as an affront to acceptable morals.

The women's and human rights movements have not yet formed a similar progressive alliance. These movements will need to engage with conservative groups by drawing on areas of convergence, which could either entice conservatives to shift their positions or weaken their collective resolve. The importance of a robust media and communications strategy to counter propaganda and deliberate disinformation cannot be understated. It is important that both genders be mobilized to actively take part in the equality and justice movement, lest the struggle be stereotyped as women's selfishness—a framing that is always likely to attract negative reactions in a deeply patriarchal society. Sometimes, it is important to make some tactical concessions without losing the focus of overall strategic intent.



# DIVIDED CONSERVATIVISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Gareth Fowler

The United States has a rich history of conservative civic activism, stemming from the rise of the post–World War II conservative movement and its restructuring of the Republican Party. Conservative civic groups currently appear to be enjoying a resurgence, contributing to a run of electoral triumphs that has seen the Republicans seize control of the presidency, both houses of Congress, and an overwhelming majority of state governments. However, the picture is also more complicated as President Donald Trump’s rise represented a changing of the guard within U.S. conservatism that, while empowering certain civic groups, dealt a serious defeat to other conservative organizations. The outcome of these internal struggles will determine the lasting significance of recent conservative activism in the United States.

## Origins

The modern U.S. conservative movement originated in the 1940s and 1950s, combining anticommunism, resistance to the New Deal welfare state, and opposition to social changes associated with the incipient civil rights and feminist movements. Much early activism was elite-led and intellectual, in reaction to the perceived acceptance of New Deal liberalism by both parties.<sup>165</sup> The movement scored an early success when Republicans nominated conservative ideologue Barry Goldwater for president in 1964, following a prolonged campaign by groups like Young Americans for Freedom.<sup>166</sup> William F. Buckley’s establishment of the *National Review* provided a nationally recognized outlet for the movement. Grassroots organiza-

ing was often dominated by conspiratorial groups like the John Birch Society (which claimed that former president Dwight D. Eisenhower was a communist sympathizer).<sup>167</sup>

With the continued progress of the civil rights and feminist movements, as well as controversial Supreme Court decisions legalizing abortion and banning organized prayer in public schools, social issues took on greater prominence than anticommunism and hostility to the welfare state. Emblematic of this phase was the campaign led by Phyllis Schlafly and other conservative women against the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>168</sup> The movement also continued to institutionalize and professionalize, as evidenced by the founding of the conservative Heritage Foundation and libertarian Cato Institute.

Internal histories of the conservative movement cite former president Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 as the culmination of this multidecade struggle. The so-called Reagan revolution united elite conservative intellectuals with grassroots organizations, especially Christian conservatives dismayed by social upheaval. This time of internal harmony within U.S. conservatism appears unlikely to recur.<sup>169</sup>

## Contemporary Trends

The current landscape of conservative civil society includes both newly established organizations and movements as well as older groups. It includes professional organizations focused on specific policy areas and mass grassroots movements, which often lack clear ideologies and have contentious relationships with longstanding professional organizations and advocacy groups.

### Single-Issue Groups

Many of the most successful conservative civic organizations are professional bodies funded by corporations and the super-rich. Billionaires like the Koch brothers, Charles G. Koch and David H. Koch, as well as other Fortune 500 companies have funded a network of right-leaning think tanks and advocacy groups. Some of these advocacy groups helped to organize the 2009 Tea Party protests, while others grew out of the movement. While some of these have very broad conservative agendas, generally of a libertarian bent, many target specific issues.

One such group, the Federalist Society, has especially benefited from a cohesive ideology and narrowly focused program. The Federalist Society is a network of lawyers, judges, and academics seeking to push U.S. constitutional law toward originalism, the doctrine that the U.S. Constitution should be interpreted according to the document's original meaning. In practice, this manifests as a libertarian philosophy skeptical of federal power and supportive of individual freedoms such as religious freedom and freedom of contract. The Federalist Society's student chapters in law schools across the country help to organize and train the next generation of conservative judges, attorneys, and scholars. Multiple current Supreme Court justices (including Trump appointee Neil Gorsuch) are members, and Federalist Society

scholarship has influenced recent decisions on gun rights, campaign finance, and the limits of congressional power.<sup>170</sup> Federalist Society Vice President Leonard Leo advises Trump on judicial nominations, leading to accusations that the government has “outsourced” this process.<sup>171</sup> The Federalist Society receives funding from the Koch network and other big business groups, and has become so influential that it can be difficult to separate it from the Republican legal establishment in general.<sup>172</sup>

The anti-immigration movement includes a collection of megadonor-funded think tanks and advocacy groups, such as the Center for Immigration Studies and the Federation for American Immigration Reform. Critically, however, it also includes NumbersUSA, a powerful grassroots organization with more than one million members.<sup>173</sup> Their successful defeat in 2007 and 2013 of attempts to grant amnesty to existing undocumented immigrants—a reform backed by libertarian billionaires like the Kochs—presaged the success of Trump’s later immigration-focused campaign.

The National Rifle Association (NRA), a gun rights organization commonly described as one of the most influential groups in U.S. politics, shares this combination of generous funding and millions of grassroots members.<sup>174</sup> Although the NRA was founded in the nineteenth century as a sponsor of shooting clubs without any particular political program, in the 1970s, it transformed into an advocacy group deeply opposed to virtually all gun control measures.<sup>175</sup> The NRA’s ideology is an unusual mix of libertarianism and “law and order,” both accusing the federal government of tyrannical overreach in seeking to limit gun ownership while calling for the stationing of armed police officers in schools to prevent shootings.<sup>176</sup>

## **Mass Movements**

Conservative mass movements can be highly influential but also face major structural obstacles in seeking to maintain an autonomous presence outside of the Republican Party. In practice, these movements often become largely passive vote banks, although their activism can and does move politics in unexpected directions.

### *The Christian Right*

The struggles of the Christian right, made up largely of evangelical Protestant churches, since the 1980s are emblematic of these difficulties. The conservative Christian movement of the 1970s and 1980s was one of the largest civic groups in U.S. history, with organizations such as Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority raising millions of dollars and delivering two to four million votes for Ronald Reagan in 1980.<sup>177</sup> However, despite the evangelicals’ lobbying, the Reagan administration prioritized tax cuts and confronting the Soviet Union over Christian objectives like a federal abortion ban.<sup>178</sup> These failures led to internal struggles over whether to move even closer to the Republican Party (the choice of Ralph Reed’s Christian Coalition) or withhold support unless the Republicans took steps toward Evangelical priorities (advocated by James Dobson’s Focus on the Family).<sup>179</sup>

Ultimately, the former strategy won out, and the Christian right essentially merged with the Republican Party under former president George W. Bush, himself a devout Protestant. During the 2004 election, Christian activists reacted to a recent state court decision endorsing gay marriage by placing gay marriage bans on the ballots in many states. Networks of church leaders and activists were also the backbone of Bush's reelection campaign, and evangelical voters turned out to support the president and the proposed gay marriage prohibitions.<sup>180</sup> However, despite Bush's record support from evangelical voters, they again failed to persuade Republicans in Congress to pass a constitutional amendment against gay marriage.

Since 2004, white evangelicals have become the nation's most reliable Republican voters, without forming any notable independent civic groups. Mormon Mitt Romney and questionably pious Trump both equaled or surpassed Bush's record evangelical support in 2004.<sup>181</sup> Opinion polls show that, since 2011, white evangelicals have gone from the group most likely to say that personal morality was necessary for the "ethical performance of official duties" to the group least likely to say so, demonstrating their uncritical embrace of Trump.<sup>182</sup> The new generation of Christian right leaders, such as Jerry Falwell Jr., have called Trump their "dream president."<sup>183</sup> With gay marriage legalized nationally by the Supreme Court's 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, there are few remaining religious wedge issues to drive mass mobilization. Overall, the Christian right appears finished as an independent political force.

### *The Tea Party*

The Tea Party protests of 2009 reinvigorated a conservative movement demoralized by the election of president Barack Obama. Sparked by opposition to government bailouts and stimulus spending following the 2008 financial crisis, the first protests were organized by veteran conservative activists, including some from the Christian right, and funded by advocacy groups.<sup>184</sup> The movement was promoted by conservative media organizations like Fox News, whose celebrity pundits made frequent appearances at demonstrations.<sup>185</sup>

It is difficult to specify the political ideology behind the Tea Party. The libertarian-leaning billionaire funders advocated lower taxes and the curtailment of existing social programs. However, the protesters themselves tended to be older white Americans who, while very conservative, focused on Obama's plans to expand health care coverage and cultural issues like illegal immigration. A common sentiment among protestors was that they had earned their government benefits through a lifetime of work while the government was attempting to subsidize the undeserving, such as the unemployed or illegal immigrants.<sup>186</sup>

Parts of the Tea Party's program could also be described as nationalist, given the opposition to (largely Hispanic) immigrants, widespread anti-Islamic sentiment, and the criticism of Obama and his policies as "un-American" and a betrayal of the country's heritage. Leftist critics preferred to describe the Tea Party as a racially resentful backlash to Obama, noting the popularity of conspiracy "birther" theories alleging that Obama was a foreign-born Muslim.<sup>187</sup> In this way, the Tea Party may have represented a precursor to the more explicitly white

nationalist elements of the alt-right and the Trump campaign. Indeed, Trump first came to political prominence as the most notable advocate of the birther theory.

Much of the Tea Party's energy went into attacking Republican officeholders that they regarded as traitors for supporting increased spending and amnesty for illegal immigrants. Tea Party activists succeeded in defeating several incumbents in primary elections. The Tea Party has also produced a number of civil society groups, ranging from networks of small grassroots organizations (such as Tea Party Patriots) to the aforementioned elite advocacy groups.<sup>188</sup> However, these have largely faded from the limelight since the end of the large-scale protests. Although many early organizers sought to keep the Tea Party independent, it has, in practice, become a wholly incorporated (albeit rebellious) wing of the Republican Party.

### *The Alt-Right*

The most publicized recent trend in conservatism activism has been the rise of the nebulous alternative right, or alt-right. Online activism on the news site Breitbart—called “the platform for the alt-right” by former executive chairman Steve Bannon—and other forum-hosting websites like Reddit and 4chan has been central to the movement. Breitbart described the alt-right as a mix of “dangerously bright” white nationalists like Richard Spencer, “natural conservatives” advocating pro-white politics and traditionalism, ideology-free online trolls trying to shock the establishment, and a small rump of committed violent white supremacists.<sup>189</sup> Alt-right political thought leans toward an isolationist form of largely white nationalism. It frequently attacks Democratic and Republican opponents as “globalists” under the sway of multinational elites advocating open borders and the weakening of the United States.

The alliance between the Trump campaign and the alt-right was orchestrated by Robert Mercer, a hedge fund billionaire, and his daughter Rebekah. Before 2016, Bannon and the Mercers (who own a stake in Breitbart) had discussed a plan to leverage widespread anti-elite sentiment to elect an outsider and rip up the political establishment.<sup>190</sup> The Mercers convinced Trump to make Bannon his campaign manager and hire the data science firm Cambridge Analytica to target voters online—notably, the Mercers had previous investments in Cambridge Analytica, which also employed Bannon as vice president.<sup>191</sup> As the alt-right has yet to form significant civic groups along the lines of the Christian right or Tea Party, the Trump campaign itself and the accompanying rallies may be considered its civil society manifestation.

## **A Shift in Conservative Activism**

The United States is witnessing a change in the nature of conservative civil society. The “Never-Trump” doctrinaire conservatives appear to be generals without armies, as Trump continues to enjoy enormously high support among ordinary Republicans. Professional groups like the Federalist Society certainly benefit from having a sympathetic ear in the White House, but have not noticeably expanded as civil society organizations. The Christian right and Tea

Party have largely been absorbed into the Republican Party at the cost of their capacity for independent activism, while the alt-right has yet to demonstrate a substantial civil society presence outside of Trump-affiliated rallies. Violent white supremacist demonstrations like the 2017 Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally have attracted heavy media coverage but have failed to draw popular support on anything resembling the scale of previous conservative mass movements. Following a short stint as White House chief strategist, Bannon attempted to further organize a nativist and populist movement against the Republican establishment, but this effort was dealt a likely fatal blow when the Mercers withdrew their support for Bannon after anti-Trump remarks he made went public.<sup>192</sup> Indeed, some analysis suggests that Trump was actually the anti-civic-activism candidate, who performed worst among veteran activists and best in areas without a strong civil society.<sup>193</sup> However, this can also be interpreted as a testament to his success in inspiring a new form of conservative political activism separate from previous sources.

What is apparent is that the tenor and ideology of U.S. conservative activism has changed. Libertarian and anti-state elements remain highly influential, especially in areas like gun rights and a general hostility to “job-killing regulations.” However, traditional conservative priorities like free trade, cuts to social spending, personal piety, and assertive global leadership have been replaced by an explicitly nativist and nationalist hostility to immigration, protectionism, and strong suspicion of international engagement. Like its predecessors, this new activism is enormously partisan and politicized, inseparably tied to the internal dynamics of the Republican Party. Given that so much recent activity has revolved around the personal image of Donald Trump, its future progress and ultimate impact remain uncertain.

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