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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY  
Daniele Conversi,  
IKERBASQUE Basque Foundation for  
Science, Spain

\*CORRESPONDENCE  
Andrew Cunningham  
✉ [cunninghamandrew2@gmail.com](mailto:cunninghamandrew2@gmail.com)

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# Editorial: The nexus between civil society and authoritarian practices in times of crisis

Andrew Cunningham<sup>1\*</sup> and Rodrigo Mena<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Independent Researcher, London, United Kingdom, <sup>2</sup>International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, Netherlands

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

### The nexus between civil society and authoritarian practices in times of crisis

In 2025 we live in an age witnessing the resurgence of authoritarianism, illiberalism, populism, and even fascism. Much academic literature focuses on defining and categorizing regimes and comparing and contrasting contemporary governments to authoritarian regimes of the past. This Research Topic eschews categorization and historical comparison and examines the concept of authoritarian *practices* (after Glasius), rather than regimes, as applied to civic space.

The goal of this research project is to both deepen the empirical evidence base for studying the relationship between civil society actors and states which engage in authoritarian practices—particularly in environments of political, human rights, or humanitarian crises; and better theorize how this relationship develops. We highlight in this Research Topic cases studies from Hungary, Bangladesh, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Chad, Italy, Libya, and China, examining how emergency powers, state penetration, and authoritarian practices impact civil society and governance.

In the case study “*Misuse of Emergency Powers and its Effect on Civil Society*,” [Mészáros](#) looks at how democratic tolerance has been used for their own destruction in Hungary. Gradually, various forms of crisis management have become the very nature of the governing political parties since 2010. Under the framework of Carl Schmitt’s enemy-friend dichotomy, the Orbán regime has created its own “enemies,” partially among those who would never be thought to be a threat to a constitutional democracy but to be considered its foundational elements (political opposition, NGOs, free media, etc.). This article shows how emergency powers and autocratic legalism were misused against civil society.

In a report on a Médecins Sans Frontières research programme on the engagement between international humanitarian non-governmental organizations and states, “*Authoritarian practices on the rise?*” [Cunningham and Healy](#) examine the engagement between international humanitarian non-government organizations (INGOs) and states as a contested space. The research examined the principal factors that influence the attitudes that states take toward international humanitarian NGOs working on their territories during situations of crisis. This paper reviews the findings from four field case studies (Bangladesh, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Chad, and Italy) as well as findings from a desk study on the current situation in Afghanistan and a review of MSF’s history with states. The research was grounded in a theoretical framework which integrates

the concepts of authoritarian practices (Glasius), regulatory practices, the differentiation between strategic and tactical levels of engagement, and conceptions of legitimacy.

Next, in “*Crisis as opportunity—manifestations of civic practice in Libyan governance and rule of law*,” Brinkman looks at Libya’s protracted conflict, where authoritarian, illiberal, and democratic practices exist at local and (inter)national levels. The repeated occurrence of crises in governance and rule of law, such as sudden restrictions on civil society or deferred elections, opens a window for the emergence of civic practice. Drawing on Kaldor’s concept of war and peace logic and a development ethics viewpoint, this study critically discusses how manifestations of civic logic depend on inclusive actor selection. This paper, based on Libyan-led co-inquiries and an analysis of dialogues and actions from an EU-funded rule of law programme, demonstrates how the involvement of a diverse group of Libyans initiates manifestations of civic practice that are used during times of crisis.

Tian et al., in their article “*Strategies of State Penetration: A Network Analysis of Community Governance in Shanghai*,” research how the Chinese state has been found to penetrate community participation to strengthen state infrastructure power, but understanding of these strategies remains equivocal. Using network analysis, they examine the strategies of state penetration on the relation between residents’ committee (RC) and the thick network through routine community activities in an award winning gated community in Shanghai. The network was found to be horizontal (rather than hierarchical) around the RC. Instead of manifesting state power, popularity within the network translates to decision-making power in deciding routine community activities. However, residents with high network popularity are affiliated with the state, and this association may be generated by the state itself through a deliberate process of cultivation and co-optation. Their findings shed light on the nuanced strategies of state penetration: rather than overt suppression or infiltration, the state exerts authority over a horizontal network, which ensures that self-organized community participation occurs under state domination.

Finally, in “*NGO strategy, policy networks, and climate policymaking process in China*,” Zhang examines the relationship between grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the authoritarian state of China in terms of mobilizing policy changes in response to the climate crisis. It focuses on the advocacy strategy of NGOs and seeks to explain how NGOs in China use their expertise as the entry point to establish policy networks with the country’s most influential policymakers and experts. Greenovation Hub (G:hub) is the case study for this investigation. The policy network framework that Teets (2018) initially applied in the Chinese context is used. The research discovered that mutually aligned policy objectives are the key for

the effectiveness of NGOs’ expert advocacy strategy of constructing policy networks within the expert community in China. In addition, this research also discusses the conditions for NGO inclusion, finding opportunities and limitations linked to the alignment of NGOs’ policy objectives with the state’s vision for climate policy. The significance of the findings is that the expertise strategy works for policy advocacy regardless of regime type, but that accessing policy networks is even more vital in a closed policymaking process.

The cases examined in this Research Topic reveal that authoritarian practices do not merely emanate from the nature of the regimes but are embedded in the everyday governance of crisis, regulatory control, and strategic state-society engagement. As Glasius’ concept underscores, authoritarianism is not confined to overt repression but operates through the gradual erosion of civic space, the co-optation of participation, and the instrumentalisation of crises to consolidate control. Whether through the misuse of emergency powers, the penetration of community networks, or the selective inclusion of NGOs, states engaging in authoritarian practices shape civil society not only by exclusion but also through (controlled) integration. This complex, adaptive relationship challenges the conventional dichotomy between authoritarian and democratic governance, demanding a more nuanced understanding of how civil society both resists and is reshaped within these constraints.

## Author contributions

AC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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