

Human rights NGOs can't rely on western funding any more

James Ron

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This year, Israel has become the new front line in a global debate between conservatives and civil society liberals.

In late February, conservative Jewish lawmakers pushed through a draft law that would force Israeli NGOs to register as political parties, pay taxes on foreign donations, and preface all communications with the statement, "we are funded by foreign political entities."

State bureaucrats, soldiers and Jewish settlers, by contrast, would be untouched by the law, even though they too benefit from generous overseas donations.

A final parliamentary vote is scheduled for late April, and its outcome will shape Israeli society and Zionism -- the Jewish national movement -- for years to come. Since western donors rarely permit NGOs to pay foreign taxes from their grants, the new law may force many Israeli NGOs out of business.

This is a new and disturbing chapter in Israeli politics. Until now, the Jewish-majority state has recognized, albeit reluctantly, the right of critical Arab and Jewish groups to voice their views and receive overseas aid. This tolerance, Israeli governments tacitly acknowledged, was the price of doing democratic business and receiving generous U.S. aid. The gloves are now coming off, and Jewish conservatives -- with a bizarre assist from our own government -- are seeking to change the rules of the game.

The proposed law was triggered a few months ago by conservative Jewish groups such as Im Tirzu, an Israeli student organization, and the right-wing NGO Monitor. They were incensed by foreign and local criticism of Israel's Gaza war, which included some illegal attacks on civilians.

The conservative campaign turned ugly, with nationalist activists depicting a prominent Jewish civil libertarian as a horned animal on public billboards. The last time something like this happened, an Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was killed by a right-wing radical.

The conservative offensive may yet be blunted by determined opposition within Israel. The current diplomatic furor over Jewish settlements may help, as the Israeli government could be loath to further antagonize the Obama administration.

The Canadian government is not likely to play a constructive role in all this, since it has also proved keen to silence Israel policy critics. The fallout from the Rights and Democracy imbroglio in Montreal, for example, must have sent Ottawa officials scrambling to re-examine their ties with groups critical of Israeli policies. For reasons of internal Canadian politics, the Harper government has placed itself firmly on the side of the most hard-line Jewish nationalists.

Regardless of how the Israeli NGO debate turns out, Israel is only one chapter in a much bigger global story; similar debates between conservatives and

cosmopolitans are now raging worldwide. As a result, governments from Russia to Egypt are imposing ever-tighter curbs on local NGOs.

This conservative backlash follows -- and was probably caused by -- two decades of liberal, Western-funded NGO growth in the developing and post-Communist world.

It all began after the Cold War, when western scholars and policy-makers heralded the spread of liberal civil society, arguing that power was shifting towards an organized, human rights-friendly citizenry.

States were no longer in charge, the experts said. Instead, international groups such as Amnesty International, assisted by thousands of smaller NGOs worldwide, would spread liberal ideals everywhere.

Boosted by this enthusiasm, western donors, including Canada, stepped up their financial support of NGOs across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. "Civil society" became the new foreign aid buzzword, and the western policy machinery churned out pro-NGO studies, grants, and workshops.

At first, the results seemed promising. Liberal NGOs flourished, developing a powerful and articulate voice on important causes.

That tide is now turning, however, as the wave of western-funded NGOs generates an ever-growing backlash. Conservatives everywhere are attacking civil society where it hurts most: their foreign-funded wallets.

The problem, it turns out, is that western aid rendered most non-western NGOs entirely dependent on European and North American money.

Charitable funds are available in all societies. Outside the West, however, most of these monies go to traditional charitable activities such as faith-based organizations, schools, and orphanages, rather than to western-style NGOs devoted to liberal ideals. The western-style NGOs are structured quite differently than traditional charitable entities and their goals are often quite distant from local religious or cultural mores.

As a result, most non-western civil society groups have preferred to decipher the small print on western donor web sites than to do the hard -- and often unrewarding -- work of cultivating local funders.

To fix this problem, western donors must spend their support dollars more wisely. To build a sustainable and locally legitimate NGO sector, donors should provide smaller and smarter grants, conditioning their support whenever feasible on NGO efforts to secure local funds.

Happily, there are some excellent examples of self-sufficient NGOs to draw on. In Bangladesh, for example, BRAC -- an impressive NGO powerhouse -- has become one of the world's largest and most self-sufficient civil society organizations, combining income-generating activities with advocacy for rights, equity, and democracy.

If western donors are smart, they will encourage NGO recipients to learn from BRAC.

None of this will rescue Israel's NGO sector today, of course. That task is something only local activists can accomplish, with a bit of support from their foreign friends.

The battle for Israeli democracy and the Jewish national movement is raging, and the super-nationalists have the upper hand. If conservative Jewish lawmakers

push through the new NGO law next month, the country will slip further into xenophobic paranoia, pouring new fuel on fires already burning across the region.

Hard line nationalists often choose confrontation over compromise, and the Jewish variant, sadly enough, has proved no different.

James Ron is associate professor at the Norman Paterson School for International Affairs. He studies global and local NGOs with funding from Canada's Social Science and Humanities Research Council and the U.S.' National Science Foundation. He is also a member of Human Rights Watch's Canada Council. (carleton.ca/~jron)

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