

**Confronting Tocqueville in Africa:  
continuity and change in civil society during Nigeria's democratization**

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**Abstract:** The democratization literature commonly claims that democratic transitions require an independent civil society. However this view, which builds upon Tocqueville, reifies boundaries between state and society. It also over-predicts the likelihood that independent civil society organizations will engage in confrontation with the government. Drawing upon Hegel, I develop a two-dimensional model of civil society that clusters organizations according to goal orientation and autonomy. This illustrates how high levels of autonomy combined with goals that extend beyond an internal constituency are linked to democratization. I then examine Nigeria's civil society during the era of democratization between 1985 and 1998, and identify important changes in the political opportunity structure. I attribute changes in autonomy and goal orientation of organizations to three factors: transnational organizing, coalition building, and victimization. My findings question the assumption that autonomous organizations will challenge the state. Future research could explore links between the state mobilization during the 1990s and one-party dominance today, and could also examine an apparent infrequency of inter-group conflict in areas where civil society organizations strengthen in-group identities.

**Key words:** Nigeria; democratization; civil society; Africa; authoritarianism; transitions

The unexpected death of General Sani Abacha in 1998 ended nearly 17 years of dictatorships in Nigeria, leading to what has been the longest stretch of democracy since independence in Africa's most populous country. The democratization literature attributes such transitions to factors such as demands from below,<sup>1</sup> international pressure,<sup>2</sup> or elite splits within the junta.<sup>3</sup> Rather than examining the causes of Nigeria's transition, I offer an explanation for why some organizations chose to agitate for regime change while others did not, even though they possessed organizational characteristics commonly associated with contentious politics. These different choices highlight a weakness underlying theories which link political autonomy to activism. I argue that civil society is better theorized by taking into account organizations with different types of goals and a range of relationships with the state. The transformation of Nigeria's civil society during the era of democratization remains a salient research topic due to its lasting legacies on today's increasingly illiberal regime. Moreover, support for independent civil society remains a staple programmatic component of foreign aid and democracy promotion.<sup>4</sup>

This essay proceeds in five steps. First I outline some of the criticisms of civil society articulated by area studies specialists who argue that the concept exaggerates distinctions between state and society. Official mobilization programs, powerful traditional authority figures, large informal economies, and corporatist arrangements in Africa make these boundaries ambiguous. I attribute the misconceptualization of civil society to Tocqueville's tremendous impact on democratization theory, which links an independent civil society to vibrant democracy. His approach opens up civil society as a concept to charges of Western bias. I suggest that Hegel's view of civil society accommodates a range of relationships between state and society. I propose a model of civil society that groups organizations in terms of their level of

autonomy and their type of goal orientation. Autonomous organizations possess a high level of independence from the state in contrast to corporatist groups or state agencies. Inwardly-oriented organizations aim to serve members or limited constituencies, while outwardly-oriented organizations seek to provide non-excludable benefits for the general public. Second, I explain how economic liberalization in the 1980s and then the annulment of Nigeria's 1993 presidential elections transformed the political opportunity structure. Both events triggered massive protests, the construction of new coalitions across social cleavages, and important changes in associational life. Third, I elaborate on Nigeria's heterogeneous mix of organizations showing how many of them straddle conventional boundaries between state and society. The pro-democracy movement grew because of organizations that shifted toward increased autonomy and external goal orientation. To explain why this happened, the fourth section treats civil society organizations as a dependent variable. I attribute changes in an organization's goal orientation and autonomy to networking with international NGOs, coalition playing with other organizations, and victimization by the state.

I conclude by pointing out how my model contributes to our understanding of democratization by identifying important – and ongoing – sources of change in associational life. It contributes to theories that explore the boundaries between state and society, and it highlights the importance of Hometown Associations as an often neglected sector of civil society. Future research could examine how state mobilization during the 1990s contributed to single political party hegemony today. It also could explore how independent community development organizations that strengthen intra-group identity surprisingly do not appear to contribute to inter-group conflict.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE**

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville attributes the strength of democracy to America's vibrant associational life, in which people voluntarily cooperate in order to advance their shared ideas and interests.<sup>5</sup> Even if civic associations are not explicitly political, Tocqueville's claim that they engender social norms conducive to democracy emerged as a hugely influential idea in the democratization literature. Putnam for example argues that vibrant associational life builds "social capital" – horizontal bonds of trust that improve government performance and promote democratic stability, even where organizations do not seek political power or policy influence.<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville's theory visualizes civil society as associational activity that occurs in political space outside of the state, an idea seized upon in the 1980s and 1990s as organizations and activists struggled against oppressive dictatorships. For this reason, much of the democratization literature emphasizes the importance of civil society's insulation from the state. It presumes that the capacity for independent organizing is linked to the likelihood of challenging illiberal regimes.<sup>7</sup>

Foreign aid destined for civil society organizations is similarly premised on the assumption that building an independent civil society promotes democracy. For example, the United Nations Democracy Fund formed in 2005 seeks to "strengthen the voice of civil society...to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide," and it specifically funds organizations that aim to expand participation and engage governments. Non-economic bilateral aid from the United States Agency for International Development, which includes assistance to civil society, grew from \$434 million in 2004 to \$646 in Fiscal Year 2007.<sup>8</sup> Article 12 of the draft African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance under consideration by the African Union calls on members to, "promote democratic principles and practices as well as

consolidate a culture of democracy and peace.” This includes creating “conditions for civil society organizations to exist” and participate in politics through independent organizing.

Tocquevillian assumptions have their limits though. Putnam’s critics point out that dense associational life led to fascism in Germany by strengthening in-group bonds rather than bridging differences among groups.<sup>9</sup> In addition, civil society may seek neither democratization nor representation for that matter.<sup>10</sup> Assumptions of autonomy also do not apply well to an important realm of African associational life which includes organizations devoted to community development and social insurance. This sizeable segment of civil society grew during Africa’s democratization.<sup>11</sup> The seemingly “apolitical” disposition of such organizations presents a puzzle for theory that links autonomy to democratic activism. Hegel helps us unravel this puzzle.

### ***Reconsidering Critical Perspectives***

Hegel describes civil society as the sphere of relations between the family and the state, a place where mutual needs are met and contractual terms defined. This “civic community” grew out of the alienation and atomization driven by modernization, which he understands as twin transformations: politically the build a “rational” state and economically they make people more vulnerable. Both processes tear people away from their families and form the basis for political community.<sup>12</sup> His placement of contracts and administration of justice within the civic community, and his idea of the state as an expression of the lost, historical “particularity” of individuals, repositions civil society in its relation to the state. He sees them as intertwined rather than inherently independent, a perspective shared by Gramsci.

Hegel conceptually repositions civil society in ways that respond to key critiques of Tocquevillian assumptions. One such concern arises from Africanists who dispute a presumed dichotomy between state and society emerging from a “unilinear evolutionist” process of

development.<sup>13</sup> For Tocqueville, civil society precedes the state because it facilitates the transition to a binding social contract. In Africa however, civil society emerged afterwards since the construction of the modern state was intimately intertwined with colonialism.<sup>14</sup> This is actually Hegel's claim: that civil society *follows* the creation of the state as individuals seek community and identity. A second critique stems from the lack of uniform penetration of political authority in Africa, where Max Weber's rational-legal state never completely succeeded in its ability to project authority over space. Colonial powers distributed resources unevenly, focusing on the economically important regions within countries as a means of reducing the costs of imperial rule. This weak state capacity meant that the state must often contend with competing sources of influence and authority.<sup>15</sup> Hegel sees society moving towards an "absolutely rational" state, but he describes the state's essence as "spiritual." Citizens do not realize freedom through the freedoms celebrated by Tocqueville or through sovereign control over territory. Instead, a self-conscious awareness of unity spreads through civic society which is not contingent upon autonomy from the state (his "rationality" is therefore not quite Weberian). A third critique centres on the incomplete nature of rational legitimacy in Africa, where patronage practices blur public authority and private interests.<sup>16</sup> Hegel, like Weber, expects objective qualifications to replace venality and office rents.<sup>17</sup> But he claims that the virtues of a leader are insufficient to make this transition. He "monarch" represents the "personality" of the state in its totality; the point being to reveal links to the state as part of the "spiritual" essence of society.

In sum, building on models of civil society beyond Tocqueville helps to overcome a bias for "non-governmental" activity by accommodating varying degrees of autonomy from the state, repositioning the timing in which so-called civil emerges, and accounting for political behaviours formed from African experiences of the public.

### *Political Transitions and African Civil Society*

The model proposed here borrows key insights from Hegel. It distinguishes organizations' goals from their relationship to the state by mapping civil society in two dimensions: autonomy and goal orientation, portrayed in Table 1. This illustrates how autonomous organizations that choose not to engage in pro-democracy activism pose a puzzle for democratization theories which presume that autonomy leads to activism. The most autonomous organizations have established means of governing themselves through procedures to choose leaders and hold them accountable. Self-sufficiency through dues or other revenue sources help insulate them from external interference and enhance legitimacy. Political and financial resources endow autonomous organizations with the ability to establish clear boundaries from other groups or the state. Less autonomous organizations are more prone to state control. Scholars such as Rothchild and Lawson recognize the degree of state penetration as a critical source of variation in civil society as well as a weakness of theories based on Tocqueville.<sup>18</sup> Goal orientation, the other dimension, refers to the type of benefits generated by organizational activities. They could be either non-excludable and externally oriented, or limited to a specific constituency, similar to what economists refer to as "club goods."<sup>19</sup> These latter organizations are often excluded from civil society for being "parochial" or "inward-looking" because they pool resources for local development or social insurance.<sup>20</sup>

The northwest cell refers to organizations with low autonomy and inward orientation. This includes groups whose goals largely focus on their own members. They lack autonomy and may even receive support from the state. Organizations in the southwest cell also have low autonomy but they organize around outwardly oriented goals directed toward a broader constituency. Low autonomy organizations may have been formed expressly by the government for the purpose of social mobilization. This also includes organizations involved in corporatist

arrangements with the government. The southeast cell refers to autonomous organizations such as local and national human rights organizations with the capacity and the motivation to act independently of the state. They are outwardly oriented because their activities are meant to benefit the broader public rather than only their membership. Given sufficient motive, they can adopt a confrontational posture. The democratization literature focuses on human rights groups, the underground press, and highly visible pro-democracy organizations located in this cell. As a result, it is easy to overlook the lively associational activity in the northeast cell – where autonomous groups may or may not participate in pro-democracy activism. This cell captures organizations such as hometown associations “inwardly” focused on members and delimited communities even though they possess the political independence commonly associated with democratization.<sup>21</sup>

Table 1: Autonomy and goal orientation

		AUTONOMY	
		Low	High
GOAL	Inward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional associations for government workers</li> <li>Corporatist unions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hometown associations</li> <li>Community development associations</li> </ul>
	Outward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State run mobilization programs</li> <li>Front groups for the government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Human rights organizations</li> <li>Underground press</li> <li>Women’s rights groups</li> </ul>

Why did some autonomous civil society organizations decide to agitate for democracy while others did not? As the first step in answering this question, the next section identifies changes in the opportunity structure between 1985 and 1998 which explain the timing of changes in Nigerian civil society. Nigeria serves as a useful case because like most African countries, authoritarian interventions and imperial histories interfered with indigenous development of political space for associational life. These factors in turn complicated evolving political cultures of participation. The puzzle of when and whether autonomous organizations choose confrontation with the state is not unique to Nigeria. Kenya's Undugu Society emerged indigenously but then collaborated closely with the state.<sup>22</sup> Community groups agitating for housing in South Africa maintain a healthy distance from the government and formal channels of politics. Local development associations organized on the basis of ethnic hometowns are common throughout West Africa.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda through their one-party states developed official instruments of mass mobilization similar to those used in Nigeria. For a variety of reasons then, the questions posed by the Nigerian case are hardly unusual and the model proposed here can help advance a comparative understanding of civil society.

### **NIGERIA'S ERA OF DEMOCRATIZATION, 1985 – 1998**

Two critical junctures transformed civil society in the years leading up to the 1999 transition: unpopular economic reforms adopted in the 1980s and then the annulment of a presidential election in 1993. These events created a new opportunity structure, meaning that consistent and often informal changes to the political environment generated new incentives for collective action. The anticipated likelihood of success by organizations interested in challenging the government increased.<sup>24</sup> For the rulers of Nigeria's second wave of dictatorships, the cost of coercion increased and public participation without corporatism or control became riskier. For

civil society organizations, the opportunity structure brought new resources and avenues for activism.

Ibrahim Babangida's coup in 1985 took place barely a year and a half after Muhammadu Buhari terminated the country's second attempt at democracy. He lifted many of Buhari's unpopular political restrictions and launched a national dialogue on economic reform. This initial attempt at economic liberalization elicited opposition from labour, students, and some elites. The government's second attempt at economic reform, which aimed to reschedule World Bank debt, met similar resistance. By 1988, opposition to this program was substantial and highly politicized. Babangida dealt with the opposition first through a "grand corporatist strategy," which strove to create the impression of popular support by claiming the reforms were not externally imposed.<sup>25</sup> When this failed and the economic decline continued, Babangida turned to repression. His abandonment of national dialogue triggered critical realignments in civil society. As the government jailed protestors of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), civil society organizations found common cause in new calls for political reform. Other organizations began recognizing corporatist arrangements as incapable of serving their members.

In 1993 Babangida annulled the presidential election results, suspended judicial deliberation on related court cases, and abolished the electoral commission. His government found itself facing a pro-democracy movement with deep roots in the SAP protests. A coalition of pro-democracy organizations launched a nation-wide campaign of civil disobedience, and strikes paralyzed the nation. In Lagos, the economic hub of the country, the governor called the situation "beyond control." The Army was called in after he told the Minister of Defence, "I would accept whatever measures that are taken to bring about peace."<sup>26</sup> Although the movement united around the goal of a democratic transition, it divided over the most contentious issues:

accepting foreign assistance, supporting the instalment of M.K.O. Abiola as the presumed winner of the 1993 election, and installing an interim government as a tactical means of forcing Babangida from power.

While the democratic opposition mulled its options over, Babangida faced pressure to get a democratic transition back on schedule. Inside his regime he faced assassination threats from middle rank officers furious about the possibility of letting the presidential election results stand.<sup>27</sup> The President's National Security Office and the Transitional Council conspired to prevent an Abiola victory by any means, organizing front groups to oppose him.<sup>28</sup> Facing conflicting elite and popular demands, combined with foreign pressure that increased the risks of repression, Babangida's options ran out. He stepped aside and transferred power to an interim government. When the caretaker government collapsed a hundred days later, a new general seized the opportunity.

General Sani Abacha began by appointing a "rainbow cabinet." It included prominent critics such as a prominent newspaper publisher, a presidential candidate from the election, and even Abiola's vice presidential running mate.<sup>29</sup> Then Abiola, after canvassing in his home region for support, came home and declared himself the legitimate president. The military threw him in jail and the pro-democracy movement reacted with protests and strikes. For the next several years, Abacha survived by keeping opposition figures divided, particularly reformers in the government and supporters of Abiola. When he unexpectedly died in 1998, the sudden death of Abiola shortly afterwards meant that the pro-democracy movement no longer faced internal divisions over the 1993 election results.

In sum, two critical changes in the opportunity framework account for the timing of shifts within the autonomy and activism of Nigeria's civil society. The first arose from economic

liberalization and the wave of protests it triggered. As the government responded with repression, this linked economic grievances to broader political demands. Like a number of other civil society groups, new human rights organizations articulated their claims in broad universal terms and sought to maintain their autonomy from the state. The government's annulment of presidential elections precipitated the second critical juncture. Again, the government faced protests. But organizations now drew upon experience gained from earlier struggles and they also found themselves working alongside new allies. The government had learned its lesson too. This time it combined repression with aggressive cooptation and visible front organizations. The next section identifies major organizations that populated this new strategic environment between 1985 and 1998, concretizing the question which subsequent analysis will answer: What explains change or persistence in the autonomy and goal orientation of organizations?

### **MOBILIZATION AND NON-MOBILIZATION**

Nigeria's period of economic liberalization saw new organizations emerge and older ones rethink their goals and their relationship vis-à-vis the state. The military governments launched programs to obtain public input on economic reform and to promote political as a preliminary step toward a democratic transition. Both cooptation and militant democratic activism became part of the political landscape. Other organizations, aware of these possibilities, curiously maintained their distance from both the government and the growing pro-democracy movement. This section elaborates on the range of relationships with the state and the variety goals illustrated by the model of civil society informed by Hegel. Discussion moves from the least autonomous groups organized by the state, to the most autonomous organizations which are the focus of Tocquevillian approaches. This section concludes by asking why some organizations seized upon new opportunity frameworks created during Babangida's regime while others did not.

### ***State Mobilization and Co-optation***

Successive military dictatorships could not have survived simply through repression. They maintained power by sanctioning official channels for participation, using front organizations led by sympathetic elites, artificially creating political parties, and using various tools for co-optation. Corporatist arrangements, defined as functionally differentiated organizations recognized by the state as the legitimate expression of interests, created a web of ties to the government. These relationships explicitly compromise independence as organizations permit interference in selection of leaders and restrain their demands in return for monopoly representation.<sup>30</sup> The organizations with these traits are characterized by the combination of low autonomy and external goal orientation, illustrating fluid boundaries between state and society.

As a strategy to contain grievances centred on structural adjustment, Babangida created a Political Bureau to hear grievances about structural adjustment and to gather popular input for a democratic transition. On one level, the Bureau was a success, hosting hearings at state capitals around the country and receiving over 27,000 suggestions. Many civil society organizations participated in the Bureau's debate over structural adjustment; however they gradually linked their comments about the economy to broader political demands. Babangida subsequently created the Directorate for Social Mobilization (DSM) for civic education and public mobilization. Several new organizations were lodged under the main directorate, including the Directorate for Mass Mobilization, Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) and the installation of a Public Complaints Commission to hear grievances from the public. Surveys and various studies describe MAMSER as a colossal failure for its top-down organization and its lack of emphasis on economic ills plaguing the country.<sup>31</sup> The military hoped the 1993 absorption of these functions by a National Orientation Agency would address these failures. By creating mobilizing structures such as the DSM, the military created a public expectation for public

participation, in fact punishing non-participation in many cases. Once the military opened a window for participation though, it proved difficult to close. Regime critics saw this opening as an opportunity for autonomous political action, while its allies saw liberalization as a threat.<sup>32</sup>

In an attempt to head off an internal split, the government pursued corporatist arrangements to agitate against democracy through the Nigeria Army Officers Wives' Association, the Police Officers Wives' Association, government-sponsored student unions, and government-owned media outlets.<sup>33</sup> The regime's elite allies also formed front organizations, including most prominently Association for a Better Nigeria. The ABN criticized the electoral commission's conduct and attacked Abiola, the presumed winner of the 1993 election.<sup>34</sup> Prior to the election, the ABN sought a court injunction against the election to either stop it outright or to drive down participation by confusing voters. It went to court again after the election to suppress the official release of the election results, after leaks showed a decisive victory for Abiola. The ABN coordinated lobbying of the recently elected National Assembly, luring legislators with hotel stays and bribes if they agreed to support an extension of Babangida's rule.<sup>35</sup> Other alleged activities included an elaborate propaganda operation to plant stories in newspapers, bribe journalists, and to co-opt human rights groups by generously funding a conference.<sup>36</sup> The government actually officially banned ABN in order to legitimize it in the public's eye.

### ***Autonomous Activism***

Human rights organizations and emerging pro-democracy coalitions also possessed an external goal orientation, but differed significantly in their high levels of autonomy. They therefore lacked the legitimacy problems obvious to front groups and which pestered the co-opted organizations. The Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR) grew out of ad hoc groups organized to free political prisoners in 1989. Funded by voluntary donations, it

promoted the rule of law and respect for due process. Like the CDHR, the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) originated in response to the government repression that accompanied structural adjustment and economic liberalization. Both groups were the outgrowth of frustrations with the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) when it failed to challenge the government. Founded in 1959, the NBA stayed aloof from political activism with an inwardly-oriented focus which served elites seeking to cultivate patrimonial ties. In 1984 a younger generation of lawyers in the NBA began to question the group's mission and to challenge government arrests of activists involved in anti-SAP protests. By doing so, their agenda started to include social issues beyond the needs of their internal members. Following a bitter power struggle in 1989, the younger more activist barristers broke off and joined pro-democracy coalitions while the NBA remained entrenched in more corporatist, conservative habits.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the legal cases taken on by CLO and CDHR were challenges on behalf of people detained under repressive military decrees. Eventually they pressured the military into a number of reforms, including limitations on arbitrary detention. The CLO and CDHR were among the civil society organizations that united to form the Campaign for Democracy (CD) in 1990. The Campaign articulated a broad political agenda focused on permanently ending military rule through a transition process. It condemned structural adjustment, explicitly linking its platform to earlier struggles. Protests following the 1993 annulment urged participants to “ignore sectionalist propaganda” since the electoral cause transcended ethnic group or political party.<sup>38</sup>

Nigerian labour was split, with the more autonomous unions agitating for democracy much earlier. The government possessed greater leverage and more resources for cooptation though. After independence in 1960, elites worked to de-politicize labour first by increasing the number of labour unions as a strategy meant to keep the labour movement internally divided.

Then during the country's second attempt at democracy (1979 – 1983), the government created mandatory check-off dues for members of the largest umbrella union, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). Both strategies, typical of corporatist arrangements, undermined labour's autonomy.

When labour felt the effects of structural adjustment in the 1980s, union members started to challenge the longstanding corporatist arrangement with the government. State affiliates also pushed labour to rethink its relationship to the government because they often opted to participate in protests independent of the national leadership. In 1986 the military lifted the ban on some of the more professional unions such as National Medical Association (NMA) and National Association of Resident Doctors. Repression over the next several years politicized these organizations and they started to demand democracy more generally.<sup>39</sup> The protests against economic policies grew and by December 1987 the NLC organized rallies in all 19 states. This led to many of its leaders being thrown in prison and the NLC being officially dissolved for a time. As a result labour's demands expanded to include human rights generally, in addition to issues traditionally associated with workers' welfare such as wages.

Throughout this era, the military government attempted to offer the NLC incentives for keeping up its side of the corporatist bargain. The government offered labour leaders positions on important government commissions. The NLC also started to purchase shares of commercial enterprises, giving it a greater stake in the corporatist status quo. At a time when the pro-democracy movement demanded the government keep to the scheduled election date, the NLC said the electoral commission should not go ahead "if there is chaos in the country."<sup>40</sup> When protests erupted following the June 1993 election annulment, the more independent unions such as the NMA insisted on instating the presumed winner of the elections, and it adamantly opposed

an interim government. By contrast, the NLC's national leadership was slow to react. Its president sent conflicting messages about its position on the annulment.<sup>41</sup> As with the anti-SAP protests, state-level and more radical unions who enjoyed more autonomy than their national affiliates were the first to join the pickets. By July ten unions were on strike, including the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers, considered crucial because the government depends so heavily on oil for revenue. The NLC eventually joined the strikes which paralyzed the country for the summer.

The military government responded with mass arrests and harassment. Abacha then decreed new barriers to union recognition and threatened financial stability by eliminating automatic check-off fees. The effect of victimization was different this time because the unions and human rights organizations alike had sources of independent support. For example, the AFL-CIO, the American umbrella union, called for a tightening of economic sanctions and opened a "Solidarity Center" office in Lagos. The German Friedrich Ebert Foundation organized strategic conferences behind the scenes.<sup>42</sup> As victims, coalition partners, and now recipients of international support, the unions possessed a new measure of autonomy and additional resources to work against the dictatorship.

#### *Hometown Associations as Civil Society*

Because they appear to have little in common with labour unions, human rights groups, or front organizations, democratization studies usually neglect an important sector of civil society common in Africa.<sup>43</sup> Community development groups and Hometown Associations (HTAs) lack an explicitly "political" or civic orientation and instead promote the development of rural villages. They also meet the welfare needs of members living away from home through self-help activities. Birthplace ties define HTA membership which is held together across great

geographical distances. Many HTAs operate with regular dues and effectively use ostracism or social pressure to enforce norms and reduce shirking problems associated with collective action.<sup>44</sup> HTAs warrant greater attention within the broader democratization literature because autonomy without agitation for democracy presents a puzzle for Tocquevillian theories of democratization. The growth of HTAs also suggests that authoritarian governments undermined themselves by neglecting development; governance failures at the national level drove political transformations at the local levels, inspiring some groups to join democratization struggles.<sup>45</sup> Examples drawn from different parts of Nigeria illustrate both of these possibilities.

In the western part of the country dominated by ethnic Yorubas, the Egbe Omo Ilu Okuku provides a typical example of an HTA. This organization focuses mainly on public works projects. It is highly institutionalized and a re-organization was able to absorb multiple chapters of its predecessor Okuku Progressive Union chapters under one umbrella covering 37 towns and villages. The organization levies membership fees and can impose fines and operates independently from the government. Its self-financed projects include schools, a post office, an electricity grid, road construction, and a health care centre. It is thus capable of mass mobilization but its political activities are limited.<sup>46</sup> The Ilora Development Association, another Yoruba HTA, focuses on similar community development activities. Even though they are financially self-sufficient and autonomous, its activities have been limited to providing social welfare.<sup>47</sup> In a seminal study, Trager describes 1993 as a “turning point” when HTAs became increasingly disillusioned; communities mobilized for development because the government was not meeting local needs.<sup>48</sup> This occurred with the Ajifio Descendants’ Union, whose members maintain that its efficacy stems from its deliberate distance from partisan politics. But they

crossed the bright line between “political and community interests” in 1993 when they organized emergency meetings in response to Babangida’s policies that adversely affected the group.<sup>49</sup>

The patterns of political participation are similar in eastern Nigeria where Igbos are the largest ethnic group. There, HTAs illustrate high levels of internal democracy and capacity for conflict resolution but they characteristically avoid political protest targeting the state according to several in depth studies.<sup>50</sup> Over the course of seven months in 2000, I informally observed the monthly meetings of the Kado Village branch of an Igbo HTA that met outside the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja. All of the meetings addressed social welfare issues, such as paying the school fees for indigent children or paying funeral fees for deceased members. None of these meetings discussed government policies or how to influence them. Like many HTAs, it sustains itself through membership dues that provide self-sufficiency and independence, but it avoids directing its grievances at the government. With institutionalized decision procedures including a written constitutions and communication networks allowing it to quickly convey messages back home to Imo State, it appears to be an ideal structure for making political demands on the government. During a later meeting in 2004, I watched members squelch a campaign to impeach a vice president; they argued that the organization’s constitution required him to be present to defend himself. When their informal housing settlement faced destruction a few years later – like dozens of others destroyed by the government – the HTA still stayed aloof from politics, just as it had through the struggle for democracy.

The organizations profiled above, from front groups and government mobilization agencies to human rights groups and HTAs, provide a rich survey of Nigerian civil society during the era of democratization. Despite vast differences in their goal orientation and autonomy, they share important characteristics of the Hegelian-inspired model of civil society.

All of the major players in the political period of democratization emerged relatively late in the state formation process. HTAs and other groups formed in response to weak government capacity. The articulation of independent interests arose in the context of official efforts to define the public sphere. Perceptions of state encroachment changed with a shifting political opportunity structure and poor government performance. The next section explores why some groups seized upon these opportunities while others did not.

### **EXPLAINING AUTONOMY AND ACTIVISM**

What explains why some groups shifted their goal orientation, joining the pro-democracy movement? And what explains autonomy without activism among most HTAs, the puzzle perplexing Tocquevillians? The analysis presented here points to three factors that account for changes in autonomy and goal orientation: First, transnational organizing helped legitimize protest actions, provided access to outside expertise and resources, and generated foreign pressure from governments and global civil society. Second, organizations built domestic coalitions based on common goals. This “coalition playing” both lowered the risks facing any single organization and also lowered the information costs of coordination. Through this process, groups articulated demands in universal rather than particularistic terms, transcending regional, ethnic, or religious cleavages. Third, the state marginalized or co-opted more than a few organizations. But when the government responded with violence, victimization politicized and mobilized organization; repression inspired radicalization among citizens learning of new opportunity structures.<sup>51</sup>

State-directed organizations such as MAMSER and DSM exhibited the least amount of change, remaining outwardly oriented and embedded in the state in obvious ways. But they did shape the opportunity framework of civil society by encouraging civic participation, putting in

motion expectations of participation. They also utilized a discourse of universalistic goals to “end corruption” and mobilize people for national development, while front organizations such as ABN called for stability. The military governments were able to dissolve or manipulate organizations such as the Nigerian Labour Congress and ban unions and professional organizations beholden to corporatist arrangements. The pressure increased on the NLC after the 1993 election debacle as state affiliates broke ranks to defend imprisoned activists, and as the ties to international labour increased. The NLC finally defected from its corporatist agreements after the generals, through new decrees, signalled an abandonment of their understanding with labour in 1996.

By contrast, human rights organizations and various pro-democracy groups remained vigilantly independent, organizing from a position of autonomy and external goal orientation from the start. Newly available international contacts, expertise, and resources aided this effort. Mirroring trends in East Africa and globally in general, international links to and external support from human rights groups grew dramatically in the 1980s.<sup>52</sup> After 1993 foreign financial support started reaching Nigeria on a large scale. The organizations that benefited formed the core of the pro-democracy movement.<sup>53</sup> The CLO maintained extensive international contacts and benefitted from substantial donations from the United States and Europe.<sup>54</sup> The National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), formed in party through wealthy elites drawing upon Diaspora contacts, focused its efforts on a campaign abroad for international sanctions against the Abacha regime. It built strong ties to the Congressional Black Caucus in the United States Congress, asking for tough sanctions against the military government. NADECO’s international contacts paid off: strong statements from Britain, France and the U.S. State Department emboldened Abiola, who hardened his position only days after the CBC urged him to stand

firm.<sup>55</sup> When he later defied Abacha and outright declared himself the 1993 election winner, NADECO organized massive protests to defend the democratic transition. NADECO members also suffered from repression but were in a position to publicize its victimhood through its international contacts. The United Democratic Front of Nigeria formed alliances with international NGOs including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Sierra Club. The Campaign for Democracy shared in the victimization, and the government's harassment of its leaders can be explicitly traced directly to the 1980s, when the lawyers in the CD defended activists opposed to structural adjustment. But the CD differed from the organizations formed after 1993 by shunning foreign support. This gave its platform, articulated in a discourse of universal rights that broadened its appeal, an added measure of credibility and autonomy.

Among HTAs, autonomy corresponded with pro-democratic activism only after victimization or other pressures to shift goal orientation. Organizations such as the Afijio Descendants' Union became involved in pro-democracy organizing only after its members suffered at the hands of the government. Other HTAs that remained insulated from state encroachment such as those from Imo State did not undergo such a shift in goal orientation. HTAs can be useful from a military government's point of view by relieving the government from popular pressure to deliver social services. In some cases, military governments even recognized certain HTAs as official development agencies partnering with MAMSER for local development planning. Such corporatist arrangements afford HTAs some protection from harassment. The goals of HTAs are generally not articulated in universalistic terms since benefits accrue to a specified constituency; for the same reason coalition playing is unusual.

While the conclusions based on the number of groups discussed here might seem limited, the causes of organizational transformation share important similarities across organizations with

otherwise very different theoretical orientations within our 2-by-2 matrix. All of the existing organizations that joined the pro-democracy movement suffered from some government repression. Some did not make use of available transnational support but if they allied with other domestic groups this did contribute to a transformation in goal orientation. Such coalition playing encouraged civil society organizations to articulate goals in universal rather than in more parochial in-group terms; this occurred for example when unions began to discuss broader political rights rather than simply wages. Front organizations and state managed instruments of popular mobilization unsurprisingly did not change. But they did produce a feedback effect on the political opportunity framework, raising the expectations for popular participation at a time of new opportunities and resources. While these organizations are closer to the state and further from the family than those emphasized by Hegel's definition, their inclusion improves our understanding of associational life and the conceptual characterization of its fluidity in Africa.

### **DEMOCRATIZATION AND AUTONOMY WITHOUT "ACTIVISM"**

Tocqueville recognized that a lively associational life was conducive to democracy. By building upon this insight and implicitly focusing on autonomous civil society, the democratization literature unexpectedly helped to reify boundaries between state and society. This builds theory which neglects the impact of official organizations and mobilization programs on civil society and which is ill equipped to explain the paradox of autonomy without activism. Hegel provides some clues to understanding Africa's publics, where civil society sought sovereignty in self-consciousness and not necessarily in the preservation of liberal individual rights vis-à-vis the state. Similar to the work of scholars such as Rothchild and Lawson, this essay develops a model of civil society that captures the varying intrusiveness of the state on political space. Significantly, this continuum has as much to do with goal orientation as with a possibility of

authoritarian encroachment on independence. This two dimensional model of autonomy and goal orientation avoids privileging political activism in relation to the state, and it simplifies how to situate autonomous organizations that limit themselves to in-group membership benefits. It also addresses critiques of Tocquevillian approaches which sequentially position civil society before the state and which presume a uniform penetration of state authority throughout society.

Economic liberalization in the mid-1980s, followed by the government's annulment of the 1993 elections, together account for the timing of critical transformations of Nigerian civil society. This included the expansion of official mobilization programs and front groups in contrast to new human rights organizations which formed the core of the pro-democracy movement. Like associational life elsewhere in Africa, civil society often straddled conventional state/society boundaries. This essay then accounted for changes in the goal orientation and autonomy, describing how some organizations mobilized for democracy in response to incentives created by a new political opportunity framework while many did not rise to Tocquevillian expectations. Organizations that engaged in transitional organizing, coalition building, and that suffered government repression shifted their goal orientation and moved towards increased autonomy. The role of international linkages while the country faced international sanctions is consistent with recent research on democratization,<sup>56</sup> but here the causal effects of victimization are especially important for understanding the behaviour of civil society organizations. Taken together, the essay's several steps thus address the conceptual orientation of different organizations, pinpoint the timing of organizational changes, and identify factors associated with organizational transformation. Unlike much of the literature on civil society's role in democratization, variation in civil society itself – rather than the level of democracy or the type of regime – serves as the outcome to be explained.

These issues have enduring relevance for democratization today because as noted at the outset, assumptions of autonomy and activism still inform foreign aid and policy guidance on democracy promotion. Understanding civil society in terms of a comparative model that captures state/society relations on a continuum makes sense in light of the rise of “electoral authoritarianism,” with many of Africa’s countries now classified as neither democratic nor authoritarian.<sup>57</sup> Following the transition to democracy in 1999, Nigeria’s civil society encountered many of the same issues facing other democratizing nations: after achieving the shared goal of defeating authoritarianism, coalitions often fragmented and organizations found themselves competing for political influence and often for the same external funding. For example the Transition Monitoring Group, a large civil society coalition which oversaw the transition, repositioned itself as the leading domestic election monitor, building upon a base of experienced activists and international contacts. The expansion of political space has meant increased division of labour among civil society, including new groups that focus on HIV, corruption, legislative oversight of the federal budget, and the differentiation of domestic and international election monitors. Durkheim saw such increased specialization as a sign of “dynamic density,” strengthening the bonds of society through increased interdependence. When Nigeria’s civil society organizations prevented the president from changing the constitution to allow himself another term in 2007 and then condemned the corrupt presidential election of his successor, it indicated a capacity for coalition playing amidst increased complexity and specialization.

Yet there was no apparent “Tocquevillian impulse” among autonomous HTAs that remained internally oriented and focused on serving their membership. In the context of Nigeria’s struggling democracy today, such groups possibly miss opportunities to achieve their

own goals. For example, when the government destroyed informal housing settlements in the Kado area of Abuja in 2008, the HTA simply moved on rather than directing its grievances at government ministers – a tactic adopted by other informal settlements around Abuja.<sup>58</sup> By ignoring the grievances of autonomous groups such as HTAs, the regime’s dubious democracy may politicize them into a more confrontational posture. But absent the outright repression of the authoritarian era, the civil society model here expects little change among them.

Early democratization research linked the type of transition to the likelihood of democratic consolidation.<sup>59</sup> The transformation of Nigeria’s civil society points to a different set of legacies which deserve fresh attention. Most significantly, the historical-social impact of state mobilization agencies is little understood. The ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) uses official resources to mobilize voters and it chooses its leadership without transparency or public accountability. Top party members, including the current president of the Senate, are close to Ibrahim Babangida (who remains active in politics). If the absence of the PDP as a cohesive institution for managing elite competition contributed to the decline of authoritarianism along the lines of what new theories on durable dictatorships suggest,<sup>60</sup> then its political hegemony today arguably impedes democratic consolidation. The legacy of state mobilization also seems to have shaped attitudes about public participation. The 2008 AfroBarometer survey reports that 43 percent of Nigerians feel that “Government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies,” and a third of respondents believe “citizens should show more respect for authority.”

Finally HTAs remain of particular interest. In the 1960s, Wallerstein noted their impact on post-colonial nationalism because their independence from the state left them relatively untainted by colonial rule.<sup>61</sup> Today they present new questions about legacies from the era of

democratization. For example, if they strengthen in-group bonds based on ethnicity, then why are they rarely linked to inter-group conflict which has been common in Nigeria since 1999? HTAs have also historically been stronger in the south but urbanization and migration appear to be changing that dynamic. HTAs and other elements of Nigeria's varied civil society deserve renewed attention as we untangle historical legacies of democratization processes and contemporary puzzles of Africa's illiberal regimes.

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