



Repertoires of the Possible: Citizen Action in Challenging Settings

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1 INTRODUCTION

Civic space is changing across the globe. After years of democratic gains, we are in the midst of a democratic reversal. The ‘new normal’ is one of what Tilly and Tarrow (2015) describe as hybrid regimes—combining some elements of democratic representation with the hallmarks of authoritarianism and intolerance of dissent (Hellmeier et al., 2021; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). Citizens have long organised and mobilised in such conditions—not least in the numerous pro-democracy and independence movements that made such progress only a few decades ago. But what does that mobilisation and citizen action look like in contemporary hybrid regimes, increasingly faced by conditions of closing civic space? What

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constraints does it face, and what tactics and strategies result? What can we say about the contributions of citizen action in such settings?

In this chapter, we offer some answers to these questions based on the 5 years of research undertaken by partners in the Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA)¹ research programme. A4EA brought together more than 100 researchers and 25 research partner organisations to explore social and political action on a range of issues, from a variety of perspectives, and using a diverse set of methods. Research looked at everyday experiences of governance, protest and contentious politics, donor-funded governance programmes, and women's leadership and political participation across 22 countries, but with a particular focus on Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan.² Exploring changes in civic space was a cross-cutting theme, as well as the focus of a cross-country comparative research project monitoring the early effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

A long history of work in development studies has focused on the important role of social and political action by citizens to express their grievances and challenge inequities in the status quo. Pointing to the limits of government and markets to solve critical development issues, such citizen-centred approaches focus on the agency of citizens, usually, but not always, acting through organised collective action. Biekart and Fowler (2012) referred to this approach as 'civic driven change', while similar work focused on 'seeing like a citizen' (Gaventa, 2010). A4EA focused particularly on what we term here citizen action for social and political change, following Benequista and Gaventa (2011).³

The four A4EA focus countries presented challenges to citizen action, including authoritarian modes of governance, constrained space for civic dissent and risks of sometimes violent reprisal for those engaged in activism (Anderson et al., 2022: 13–14). This was the case at the start of

¹ Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA)—Institute of Development Studies (<https://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/action-for-empowerment-and-accountability-a4ea/>).

² These countries were chosen from a longer list which shared certain characteristics of weak democracy and histories of authoritarianism and conflict, and were also countries of interest to the then UK Department for International Development (now UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), the funder of the research.

³ We use the term citizen here not to refer to a particular legal status, but a state of being in relation to a particular place, and its governance system, and the associated rights and obligations felt as a result.

our programme in 2016 but had worsened by 2021 when the programme concluded. The Economist Intelligence Unit's annual Democracy Index shows that between 2016 and 2020 the score of all four A4EA countries dropped, indicating growing authoritarianism (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017, 2021). Similarly, Freedom House metrics show a decline in fundamental freedoms between 2018 and 2020 for all four countries (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). In Myanmar we concluded work shortly before a military coup in 2021 drastically curtailed civic and democratic freedoms.

In the following pages, we synthesise findings from these four countries, drawing from a selection of both published and unpublished papers and articles produced by the research teams. A4EA research adopted what we term a 'citizen-eye' view of social and political action, and in keeping with this we distinguish between the dynamics and expressions that are more visible and those that are more hidden—both from authorities and also arguably in many research efforts. We first identify a number of important constraints or barriers to action. Alongside outright repression of dissent and closing civic space and a lack of effective institutional mechanisms for state-citizen engagement sit a set of norms that mitigate against action. We explore three; legacies of fear of authorities and government, gender-related norms, and quiescence, or the choice not to (directly) resist authorities. We then explore the forms of action that the research found taking place despite these constraints. The more visible of these include protest and direct action, movements and campaigns, representation by NGOs, and engagement in dialogue with officials. The less visible include cultural expressions of dissent, acting through informal intermediaries, and engaging in mutual aid, self-help and alternative institutions. The final section discusses the outcomes of those actions, again noting some that are more obvious—like concrete responses from authorities, or a greater visibility of certain issues in the public sphere—and some that are less obvious or harder to spot—such as increased political agency amongst the marginalised and progressive shifts in norms.

2 CONSTRAINTS ON CITIZEN ACTION

Global trends of increasing authoritarianism are shrinking the civic space available for many kinds of citizen-led social and political action (CIVICUS, 2020; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). Across the A4EA focus

countries a range of measures enacted by authorities—from legal restrictions to physical harassment—have combined to make it more difficult for citizens to organise. These measures extended dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic. The very visible uses of repressive power by authorities sit alongside significant deficiencies in institutionalised channels for citizen participation, which are subject to the hidden power of agenda-setting and manipulation by authorities. The research also indicates some of the ways in which invisible power underlays these more overt dynamics. We highlight three here—the importance of widespread fear of authorities, gendered constraints on women’s social and political action, and norms of quiescence.

2.1 Overt Repression of Citizen Action and Dissent

Citizens who organise to demand better governance and accountability in the contexts that A4EA studied face significant risks. The freedom for citizens to organise, raise their voices and make claims of authorities are curtailed through both legal and physical means, both offline and online. In Nigeria research on the Bring Back Our Girls movement (BBOG) noted the physical harassment of BBOG members by security forces aligned to the state (Aina et al., 2019). Studies of popular protests over access to energy highlight the frequent violent repression experienced by protestors (Hossain et al., 2021). A4EA studies of civic space in Mozambique, Nigeria and Pakistan gave numerous examples of violence, including a human rights defender killed by police in Mozambique while preparing to monitor the 2019 elections (Pereira & Forquilha, 2020), and the arrest and killing of Pakistan’s Pashtun Tahafuz Movement activists, allegedly linked to their criticism of the government (Khan, Khwaja et al., 2020). Forced disappearances of prominent government critics and targeted harassment of individuals online were also found to be common across these three countries (Anderson et al., 2022: 24–27). Those accused of undermining government narratives, fomenting dissent, or presenting uncomfortable truths were also censored—for example with both musicians and activist NGOs in Mozambique being denied airtime as a result of government interference with the media (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019; Manhiça et al., 2020). We saw increasing attempts to regulate civil society action through the law, with arbitrary and selective use of legislation to pursue and undermine those critical of government (Anderson et al., 2022: 18).

A4EA evidence indicates that such repressive action disproportionately affects rights-based organisations and development NGOs, ‘pushing and pulling’ many of these groups into closer relationships with political elites in order to survive (Hossain et al., 2018). Space has closed down particularly for those with foreign funding or links outside the country, and on issues that affect business and land interests. The closure has been supported by shifts in governance norms. In Pakistan, as one example, the ability of the state to make these authoritarian moves has been supported by shifts away from democratic models of development, governance and public accountability, aligned to geo-political changes (Mohmand, 2019). In pre-coup Myanmar government persecution of journalists and peaceful protesters, and inhumane treatment of political prisoners remained commonplace despite high hopes that the first democratically elected government would govern differently (Brenner & Schulman, 2019). Civil society actors that were part of A4EA civil society observatory panels created during the Covid-19 pandemic commonly noted that the space for them to operate safely and openly had been reducing for some years (Anderson et al., 2021).

The crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic led governments around the world to legislate, regulate and police more aggressively and autocratically in the name of public health. A natural response to the uncertainty and risks of the pandemic, restrictions on civil liberties have been widely seen as justified in order to protect people from the virus and prevent health services from being overwhelmed. In the three countries that were part of our Covid-19 civic space monitoring, however, the restrictions that came in and their enforcement have had extreme effects. In Nigeria, the heavy-handed policing of lockdowns and mobility restrictions was reported to lead to extra-judicial deaths, provide opportunities for sexual violence and corruption by security forces, and form part of the backdrop to the brutally policed EndSARS protests (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Ibeh, 2021). In Pakistan, women journalists who were critical of the Covid-19 response by government were relentlessly harassed, male journalists ‘disappeared’ and opposition political parties’ gatherings dispersed or banned while pro-government rallies were permitted (Khan, Khwaja, et al., 2020). In Mozambique, where the pandemic coincided with armed violence in the central and northern regions, press freedom was further curtailed, including attacks on media offices, and decision-making centralised and made more opaque (Pereira & Forquilha, 2021). With Covid-19 restrictions as a backdrop, social critique and popular protest around the effects

of government policies on livelihoods and freedoms, and wider governance issues, have been policed and regulated in newly aggressive ways (Anderson et al., 2021).

2.2 *Ineffective Institutions for Participation*

Within this context of rapidly closing civic space, A4EA research also looked at a number of examples of formal state-citizen engagement. While there were often some glimpses of hope and small wins through these, there was more evidence of failure to challenge ingrained ways of governing, and ineffectiveness in providing space for peaceful dialogue. For example, A4EA research found that Commissions of Inquiry set up in Nigeria were unable to effectively provide full accountability for episodes of ethno-religious violence because of political incentives and tussles between levels of state and federal authority, and the ways that the commissions were undermined. The social fragmentation at the source of the violence was simply played out again in spaces and processes initiated by Commissions, including by CSOs (Oosterom et al., 2021). Although lengthy and intense processes where citizens could theoretically have their say, the Commissions were made only advisory, and governments suppressed their reports. In Mozambique, A4EA research found that the government had been able to participate in the global Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)—premised on state-society engagement mechanisms—without actually facing serious challenges to the corruption and exclusionary decision-making in the extractives sector. Although information was disclosed, numerous barriers to it being used effectively by citizens were uncovered, including limited engagement by those driving transparency efforts with those most affected by the extractive industries, and high costs of being seen as critical of government (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019). The government was also able to set the agenda by managing what assets were disclosable. A4EA research on donor-supported efforts to generate greater citizen engagement identified how often this involved building new institutional arrangements and spaces, on the basis that existing mechanisms were ‘captured’ and controlled by elites and authorities (Anderson et al., 2020).

2.3 *Legacies of Fear*

A4EA research establishes how legacies of violence and conflict and authoritarian approaches to governance, often sustained from colonial rule, leave little trust in governments and authorities, and well-grounded fear of how authorities might behave. These legacies are of course reinforced by ongoing repression of critical voices and citizen action. Research exploring the impact of extractive industries transparency measures in Mozambique found that people were wary of being associated with NGOs demanding transparency, fearing loss of their livelihood or other reprisals, with one respondent telling researchers ‘[e]ven if we know that we’re right, we cannot act because we’re afraid of the political regime’ (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019: 35). Also in Mozambique, research on political song identified how artists would self-censor or test out reactions before making their work public (Manhiça et al., 2020). The fear of ‘making small problems bigger’ and causing trouble for themselves and their communities by approaching authorities was common in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar (Myanmar Research Team, 2021b). Respondents reported not ‘daring’ to approach authorities. This was compounded by fear of mistreatment even in accessing government services or following procedures to get citizenship or land ownership documented.

2.4 *Gendered Norms*

A4EA research identified that women’s political agency is limited in multiple ways by gendered social norms, including at the household level. Research in Pakistan showed how deeply entrenched norms in the household severely restrict the agency of women, especially when it comes to political participation (Cheema et al., 2021, 2023). These deepened even further under Covid-19, strengthening household inequalities in housework, caring roles and access to health care, including women’s ability to choose to have a vaccine. Such deep-seated norms are also expressed in barriers to voting and political participation. Analysis of women’s political participation in Nigeria highlighted extremely low numbers of women standing for elected office, and lower electoral turnout by women, with significant regional variation (Oladapo et al., 2021). A4EA research in Pakistan found that subtle processes socialise women into non-political roles, and result in a ‘gendered psyche’ that makes women feel invisible

and irrelevant to the electoral process (Cheema, Khan, Khan Mohmand, Kuraishi, et al., 2019; Cheema, Khan, Khan Mohmand & Liaqat, 2019). The largest barrier to women's participation was found to be men's views about women's political engagement and the conditions under which it is appropriate for them to vote or take political action. In Pakistan, even after they are elected, women legislators continue to be excluded from political spaces, experiencing silencing, verbal sexual harassment and on occasion threats of violence from male colleagues (Khan, Yousuf, et al., 2020).

2.5 *Norms of Quiescence*

Some A4EA research found that citizen *inaction* is common even in the face of rights denial and abuses and poor service delivery. While fear of reprisal and the potentially high costs of acting are important, so too are norms and mindsets sustained by invisible power which lead people not to challenge authorities and the status quo (Pettit, 2016). Research at a household level in conflict-affected areas of Mozambique, Myanmar and Pakistan found that poor and marginalised people in areas that have experienced conflict generally have low expectations of service provision and accountability from authorities (Barnes et al., 2021). These expectations are embedded in local norms and practices, but also in historically negative experiences of authorities and the state, and forms of governance that are authoritarian or extractive. Historic under-provision of services and limited experience of those authorities providing solutions are often coupled with authorities being implicated in causing the problems that need resolving in the first place (Barnes et al., 2021). In Mozambique, people characterised the state as an 'absent father' (Chaimite et al., 2021). In Pakistan, experiences of getting access to services were based on individual petitioning and contacts, rather than collective action to claim rights (Loureiro et al., 2021). In Myanmar decades of conflict underpinned mistrust in authorities beyond the community level and their ability—or legitimacy—to solve problems (Myanmar Research Team, 2021a). In Mozambique, the study of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative found it common for people in the areas where resources were being extracted to speak of rational choices not to pay the price of opposing the government. Two participants in that study sum this up succinctly. One argued that knowing more about extractives corruption wouldn't cause them to act because 'taking part in public protest will

not change anything in this country’, while another stated plainly that ‘[a]ccountability is not part of our culture so having information doesn’t change me’ (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019: 26).

Although this section has illustrated that constraints are many and deep, A4EA research nevertheless found a diverse set of ways in which citizens act collectively to make demands and challenge the status quo—which we move on to in the next section.

3 REPERTOIRES OF CITIZEN ACTION

Some argue that in settings of repression, low levels of democracy and closing civic space there may be expectations that we will see little social and political action, or that where it occurs it will be more violent due to the absence of peaceful channels for voicing dissent (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). In fact, A4EA research found a diverse repertoire of citizen-led action. At times these actions may be more open and direct. At others they may be more disguised or hidden from the view of public authorities. Citizens engage in hybrid strategies that combine more visible contestation with less obvious, but still crucial, acts of resistance and mutual aid. We first discuss more visible forms of action, and then those that seem less visible.⁴

3.1 *More Visible Forms of Action*

Even in the face of potential reprisals, A4EA research found people engaging in direct forms of often intense collective action on the streets, using a variety of protest tactics. These actions often emerge from a sense of moral outrage—the sense that ‘enough is enough’—and when there is an absence—or distrust—of other more institutionalised channels for engagement (Hossain et al., 2021). Safety and security were key issues for people across the research, perhaps unsurprisingly given the histories of violence and conflict they had experienced. Perhaps more surprising is that the sense of moral outrage around insecurity was often a trigger for collective social and political action led by women. A4EA work unpacked a number of examples of women-led collective action around community security issues. For instance, women from the Hazara ethnic group—who

⁴ Based on the A4EA body of work, Gaventa (2023) offers a typology of expressions of citizen agency observed that includes this distinction.

normally are in purdah and out of the public eye—mobilised against the ethno-sectarian killings of their sons and husbands, spending Eid in their community graveyard decorated with photos of their dead relatives, or tossing their bangles at the gates of the provincial assembly to demand the state protect their families against violence (Khan et al., 2021). In Mozambique and Pakistan, research showed how women found ways to protest that were gender-specific and maintained some community norms around gender roles. Foregrounding their identities as concerned mothers or wives, or their role in defending the honour of the community, made their actions more socially acceptable (Khan & Taela, 2021).

A4EA research also explored larger-scale eruptions of protest, particularly those surrounding access to affordable and reliable energy. In Pakistan, the research documented 456 protests on access to electricity in the period between 2007 and 2015 (Javed et al., 2021). In Mozambique and Nigeria, both countries rich in energy resources, national-level fuel protests in the face of cuts of fuel subsidies have led to some of the largest and most significant protests movements in recent times (Atela et al., 2021; Gonçalves et al., 2021). Global study of energy protests in 41 countries between 2005 and 2018 found that these protests are more likely, and most significant in size or visibility, in countries with high levels of national resources yet relatively weak forms of governance (McCulloch et al., 2021). Even under the rapidly closed civic space associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, a variety of citizen mobilisations emerged, including protests on health and harassment issues (Anderson et al., 2021) and in Nigeria the explosive #EndSars movement against harassment by security forces (Ibezim-Ohaeri & Ibeh, 2021).

Collective expressions of dissent and dissatisfaction were not limited to one-off protest events. In Nigeria, for instance, the kidnapping of the Chibok girls by Boko Haram led to the formation of the highly visible BBOG campaign. While this began as a movement around a single event its agenda grew to consider other issues of safety and security—and the government's accountability for them (Aina et al., 2019). While having a strong social media presence, it combined this with sustained offline protests, vigils and demonstrations, especially in Abuja and Lagos, and also kept the story in the eyes of the mainstream media. Amongst the women-led mobilisations studied in Pakistan were the long-running Aurat march for women's equality, and multi-pronged and sustained campaigns on child sexual abuse (Khan et al., 2021).

In each of the A4EA focus countries NGOs have played important roles as advocates for citizens, as watchdogs and monitors, and as protectors of key rights and policies. These include national campaigning NGOs, like the Centre for Public Integrity in Mozambique working on demanding transparency of revenues linked to extractives industries, and those well-established organisations central to winning gender equality reforms in Pakistan (Awortwi & Nuvunga, 2019; Khan & Naqvi, 2018). They also include local associations and citizen organisations, for example, the residents association research found to be crucial in representing community needs in Mozambique (Chaimite et al., 2021), and NGOs funded by international development donors to engage the public in scrutiny of public procurement processes in Nigeria (Aremu, 2022). Research on civic space during the Covid-19 pandemic found new alliances and collaborations of such CSOs to meet immediate needs and play this watchdog role on government action (Anderson et al., 2021).

A4EA research also shows how donor-funded programmes can create space for citizen action to resolve pressing issues at a community level and engage in dialogue with officials. Studies found clear gains from programmes that sought to create new opportunities for citizen engagement. In Pakistan, for example, one programme was found to create genuine opportunities particularly for women to engage in civic affairs (Khan & Qidwai, 2021) and another was able to generate grassroots involvement in assessing the quality of basic health services and conveying the results to health departments (Kirk, 2017). In Nigeria, generations of donor-supported actions taken both by government and CSOs have opened opportunities and developed new ways of doing things that increased citizen oversight of public procurement and increased public engagement with budget-setting (Aremu, 2022).

3.2 *Action Under the Radar*

Given the risks involved, citizens may choose not to challenge authorities directly, or do so in more coded or subversive ways—or ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1990). Cultural expressions of dissent and critique of the status quo are one such form of less direct social and political action. It has been argued that such expressions are more likely in closed or authoritarian settings given their ambiguity and lower risks of individual reprisal (Márquez, 2016). Across A4EA work music, memes, graffiti and other forms of cultural expression emerge across a variety of issues and

demands. The importance of memes in sharing the collective experience of energy shortages and price rises stood out, for example—quiet acts of acknowledging a shared encounter with ineffective and unjust governance of natural resources (Hossain et al., 2021). In Mozambique, hip-hop was found to be an important way of conveying demands for public accountability, expanding the repertoire of action beyond the limited occasions when citizens' views are expressed in public protests or formal political participation. Researchers found recurring themes in hip-hop lyrics including voicing of grievances and calls for popular action on the economic situation, political-military conflict, corruption, police, public transport and the role of external donors (Manhiça et al., 2020).

Engagement and claims-making with authorities also takes place in more discreet and distanced ways—sometimes as a form of self-protection. Household-level research in conflict-affected areas identified that when people do need to engage authorities to solve problems, they often do this through a web of largely informal intermediaries (Barnes et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2021; Posse et al., 2021). Such intermediaries include informal leaders like nominated village leaders, customary authorities such as Chiefs in Mozambique or panchayats in Pakistan, social activists and campaigners, and brokers or 'fixers' that negotiated with political parties. The kinds of intermediaries that were important differed across location within each focus country—but their roles were similar.

Intermediaries acted on behalf of households, mediated between them and others, and sometimes provided solutions themselves. They sometimes resolved people's problems directly, or made decisions about disputes, and sometimes escalated or negotiated with others, including formal authorities, to find a solution. The use of informal connections to ask for favours, rather than making demands or claims through official channels, stood out, particularly in Pakistan (Loureiro et al., 2021). The research found that women were often disadvantaged in these informal systems, lacking the social and political capital to engage intermediaries or constrained by norms of public life. However, it also found examples of women who were seen as successful intermediaries despite it challenging established norms.

In the face of distrusted authorities and non-provision, A4EA research also highlights how citizens work together 'under the radar' to provide their own services through self-provisioning and various forms of action

that can be termed mutual aid.⁵ These alternatives to engaging with the state or authorities can be seen as active acts of crafting alternative institutions, following Kashwan et al. (2019), or in Hirschman's terms adopting exit rather than voice (Hirschman, 1970). The household-level research found that very often poor and marginalised people solved their governance problems through customary, informal, or highly localised ways, avoiding engaging formal authorities. In Myanmar, cultural norms combine with authorities' low legitimacy and poor track record to make self-reliance at a local level a preference in some conflict-affected areas (Myanmar Research Team, 2021b). A whole range of problems and disputes are resolved by people in—often informal—local leadership roles without involving any external or higher-level authorities. Different kinds of 'self-provision' of services were common—including self-protection through vigilante groups in Mozambique (Posse et al., 2021), or community-enforced punishments and pooling of resources in Myanmar (Myanmar Research Team, 2021b). In the latter, people worked together to create their own services, whether around education, electricity, or burial arrangements—sometimes with the direct or implicit support of authorities (Myanmar Research Team, 2021a). During the Covid-19 pandemic, we also saw an explosion of forms of mutual support and self-help, with local groups supporting one another to provide needed services and resources for survival (Anderson et al., 2021). Such horizontal forms of assistance, with or without the support of local authorities, are critical expressions of social and political agency, even where they don't challenge authorities.

4 OUTCOMES

What came of the various expressions of citizen action researched as part of our programme? How far could they overcome or shift the various constraints to action? In this section, we explore some of the more and less obvious or visible changes identified in the A4EA research.

A number of caveats are necessary. First, our selection of points here is not to suggest these are the only outcomes we should consider positive—indeed as Tadros, writing for the A4EA programme, reminds us, '[i]n contexts where space is deeply circumscribed and there is a high risk of

⁵ Following the definition of Spade (2020).

violence, survival in itself should be taken as a proxy for success' (Tadros, 2020: 5). Second, while we focus on positive outcomes in this discussion it is important to remember that citizen action also sometimes has negative consequences. A4EA research found examples where ineffective institutional engagement with citizens further reduced trust in the system (Oosterom et al., 2021), and it can also provoke extremely negative, and sometimes lethal, reprisals from authorities. Third, it is important to say that outcomes of particular actions need to be seen in relation to overall shifts and the general state of affairs—which A4EA research has argued means looking at the combined effects of multiple actions from citizens, authorities and external actors.

That said, A4EA work shows a number of important outcomes from social and political action, which might be considered useful intermediary outcomes towards more accountable governance. We discuss four here: responses from authorities on concrete issues; increased visibility of issues that mattered to citizens; increases in political agency and capabilities; and progressive shifts in norms.

4.1 Responses from Authorities on Concrete Issues

The research highlights numerous examples of increased responsiveness from authorities on concrete issues as a result of citizen action. Through working with local intermediaries, citizens were able to resolve local conflicts, and gain access to local services (Barnes et al., 2021). Citizen engagement through donor-created programmes resulted in dozens of examples of concrete improvements in service delivery, access to entitlements, greater transparency on budgets and resource use, and some examples of policy reform (Anderson et al., 2020). In Pakistan advances in women's political presence and power were aided by cross-party women's caucuses in national and provincial parliaments, often resulting in substantive policy gains (Khan & Naqvi, 2018). The combination of civil society and feminist movement support to Pakistani women politicians with donor support to their work on legislative reforms has led to a number of significant gender equality policy outcomes since the quota for women in elected bodies was restored and increased in 2002 (Khan, 2021; Khan & Naqvi, 2018). Through its protest movement, BBOG secured a number of practical responses from the Nigerian government, and arguably, the release of some of the Chibok abductees (Aina et al., 2019). In Pakistan protests raised the political salience of unreliable and expensive electricity

access and led to new investment in electricity supply (Javed et al., 2021). Women's collective mobilisation around sexual harassment has helped to shift the power equation towards women's rights in some contexts and at some moments, even if it hasn't brought about fully accountable systems (Hamada, 2021; Tadros & Edwards, 2020).

4.2 Increased Visibility of Issues that Matter to Citizens

In more closed and authoritarian settings, where certain issues or actors have been less visible, gaining visibility itself becomes an important outcome. For instance, the study of political song in Mozambique points to how this was used to build public awareness of issues of corruption, and to 'publicise and amplify a collective sentiment' (Manhiça et al., 2020: 26). Women's protests in Mozambique and Pakistan brought concrete local issues to the public arena, exacting at least recognition of them by government authorities, thus 'disrupting the norms of silence' (Khan & Taela, 2021). The BBOG movement helped to keep the abduction of the Chibok girls in the public eye over a period of years (Aina et al., 2019). Protests around the injustices associated with the Covid-19 pandemic made clear the strength of public feeling (Anderson et al., 2021). While at times social and political action intentionally remains under the radar, at other times it serves to bring more marginalised voices and concerns to the public view.

4.3 Increases in Political Agency and Capabilities

In settings with a long history of fear and repression, A4EA research highlights how citizen action can create a sense of agency, an awareness of rights, and skills and capacities for public engagement that may have previously been suppressed. We see this, for instance, in the women led protests in Pakistan and Mozambique, through which women discovered new political subjectivities, and that they had the capacity to claim rights for themselves (Khan & Taela, 2021). Through expressions of collective agency, many women report a sense of increased critical awareness (power within), and a collective sense of belonging and ability to act together (power with). The BBOG movement counted amongst its successes 'emboldening or equipping social and political actors' through extensive capacity building, learning by doing, and building alliances and coalitions (Aina et al., 2019: 30). An NGO-led social accountability

programme in Myanmar reported ‘increased confidence and capacity of CSO representatives’ and developed critical skills amongst grassroots CSOs to question authorities’ actions in ways that lowered risks of reprisal and were seen as constructive by government officials (Anderson et al., 2019). Larger scale donor programmes also reported increased capacities and networks of those who participated, and research on these in particular highlighted the important outcomes of solidarity-building between different civic actors (Anderson et al., 2020). Research on the donor-funded *Aawaz* programme found that the actions taken supported women to make demands of authorities and engage in civic affairs in ways that were experienced as empowering, and enabled those women to continue civic engagement following the end of the programme (Khan & Qidwai, 2021).

4.4 *Progressive Changes in Norms*

Finally, in settings lacking strong cultures of democracy and accountability, the studies point to a number of important, though perhaps small, examples of norm change. These include, for instance, increased expectations of transparency, new forms of interaction between citizens and authorities in new democratic spaces and modelling new processes for public engagement in Myanmar (Anderson et al., 2019). Changes in norms of inclusion, especially around gender, are also important. The women’s protests in Mozambique and Pakistan disrupted ‘the gendered and political habitus’ that excluded them from public discourse (Khan et al., 2021; Khan & Taela, 2021). The visible participation of women in the previously ‘masculinized’ spaces of public office in Pakistan also had ‘an impact on political life and discourse...In an era of constant television coverage, the public quickly became accustomed to seeing women seated alongside men during assembly proceedings’ (Khan & Naqvi, 2018: 15). Also in Pakistan, research found that by challenging dominant norms on gender, women’s voting and political participation could be strengthened through CSO intervention, even in a highly patriarchal setting. A field experiment run by A4EA showed that targeting male gatekeepers in campaigns promoting women’s right to vote increased women’s electoral turnout—with an 8 per cent increase in turnout if both men and women were engaged (Cheema et al., 2023).

Exacting responses on concrete issues, creating visibility, building political capabilities and shifting norms all represent important changes,

especially in contexts where these have been lacking or suppressed. And yet, we need also to consider these changes with caution, for several reasons. Such ‘successes’—state responses, shifts in power, a new sense of political agency—may be limited to specific events or may be fleeting. In addition, many of the examples are highly localised—not necessarily linked to larger systemic or policy change. The case of energy protests, for example, ‘found little evidence that the raw power of energy protests translated into sustained empowerment of citizens with respect to energy policy, or in their relations to the state more generally’ (Hossain et al., 2021: 18). An exception might be the policy changes that women won in Pakistan, but even this is highly subject to the political will of the regime. An A4EA review of a number of historical cases of successful citizen-led campaigns found that even these were vulnerable to roll-back once a political moment had passed (Joshi, 2019). Other work noted how new spaces for engagement were contingent on external donor support or pressure (Khan & Qidwai, 2021). Whatever capabilities are built, further closures of civic space or regressions such as the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021 can close down any new spaces established.

5 CONCLUSIONS

How does citizen action play out in contexts that are more closed, authoritarian and experiencing ongoing conflict? In this chapter, we have argued that it is constrained in more and less obvious and visible ways—through outright repression of dissent, ineffective or captured institutions for public engagement, underlying (and justified) fear of authorities, and norms that limit women’s participation as well as mitigate against citizen action. These conditions can, of course, change, but if anything, we have predominantly seen deteriorations during five years of research rather than improvements.

Despite these constraints, we have illustrated a diverse and rich set of repertoires through which citizens do manage to organise and act. The ways they do so are shaped by the constraints, and like them are often less visible or disguised from notice by authorities. Fear of being singled out for reprisal leads to below-the-radar self-organising and coded cultural expressions of dissent. Women are sometimes forced to navigate restrictive norms by acting in ways that maintain gender roles. Other norms lead people to prioritise mutual aid and self-help rather than engage with distrusted and ineffective authorities.

At crucial moments, however, under the radar more invisible forms of action spill over to the public sphere. These often occur when red lines have been crossed and moral outrage takes over, such as when fuel prices go up, or community and family security are threatened. In these cases, the lack of opportunity for state-society debate and dialogue feeds choices to act very publicly and in numbers through collective protests or social movements. We also found opportunities created successfully for state-citizen dialogue on particular issues and at the level of specific services. The significance of these ongoing small-scale interactions is likely greater than their visibility.

Overall, we saw how direct action and protest often get response from authorities, and form part of gradual shifts in power relations. While these outcomes of collective action are significant, we found that they could also be very fleeting—they could erupt quickly, but then also often subside, along with any sense of citizen power that had been gained. But such actions represent important cracks in the system—bringing previously invisible and visible issues to the table, creating a sense of agency amongst previously silent actors, and slowly shifting norms on what is possible in public places and expected from public authority. Often even fleeting protests exacted responses from authorities, followed by a subtle re-adjustment of the broader social contract or political bargain (Hossain et al., 2021). But rarely did we find that these examples of collective action by themselves lead to a change of the overall rules of the game or fundamental redistributions of power (Hossain et al., 2021; Khan & Taela, 2021). In the less obvious forms of citizen action, there is also promise of a kind. Carefully crafted opportunities for citizen-state dialogue at the frontlines of service delivery, the understanding of needs, priorities and assets and solidarity produced by mutual aid, and growing political capabilities for those previously marginalised—including women—are examples. Within the broader limitations, then, there can be some hope that the small gains drawn from the repertoires which are possible in these difficult contexts germinate seeds for change and create the momentum for more systemic changes over time.

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