



ANALYZING THE FUNCTIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ERODING THE RENTIER SOCIAL CONTRACT AND RECONSTRUCTING THE CONCEPT OF CITIZENSHIP

As Funções da Sociedade Civil na Erosão do Contrato Social Rentista e na Reconstrução do Conceito de Cidadania

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Trabalho enviado em 7 de agosto de 2025 e aceito em 13 de agosto de 2025



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Rev. Quaestio Iuris., Rio de Janeiro, Vol. 18, N.02, 2025, p. 83-104

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DOI: [10.12957/rqi.2025.93442](https://doi.org/10.12957/rqi.2025.93442)

ABSTRACT

Rentier states, by relying on revenues derived from natural resources rather than citizen taxation, construct a distinctive rentier social contract, ideally exchanging welfare provisions and subsidies for political loyalty. In such systems, a patrimonial rather than democratic social contract emerges, reducing citizens to passive clients and undermining the fundamental principles of democratic governance, such as transparency and accountability. Where citizenship is degraded to clientelism and rights are treated as revocable privileges, civil society is not merely an amalgam of service-oriented organizations; it becomes a hegemonic battlefield in the Gramscian sense—potentially transcending its conventional intermediary role and emerging as a workshop for constructing alternatives. Therefore, this article, employing a qualitative approach, argues that the primary function of civil society in rentier states is not necessarily to engage in direct power struggles (a war of manoeuvre), but rather to conduct a protracted war of position aimed at eroding the ideological and/or cultural foundations of the rentier order. The findings prove that the success of civil society in such contexts is not measured by immediate political changes, but by its ability to reshape the societal “software”—transforming the citizen’s identity from a passive beneficiary to an active, rights-bearing agent. It is through this transformative function that civil societies lay the human and institutional foundations necessary for meaningful political transitions during critical junctures.

Keywords: civil society, democracy, rentier state, social contract, war of position.

RESUMO

Os Estados rentistas, ao dependerem majoritariamente de receitas oriundas da exploração de recursos naturais, em detrimento da tributação dos cidadãos, estruturam um contrato social específico, denominado contrato social rentista, no qual a provisão de benefícios sociais e subsídios é, idealmente, trocada por lealdade política. Nesse arranjo, consolida-se um contrato social de natureza patrimonial, e não democrática, que tende a reduzir os cidadãos à condição de clientes passivos, fragilizando princípios centrais da governança democrática, tais como a transparência e a responsabilização (*accountability*). Quando a cidadania é esvaziada e convertida em práticas clientelistas, e os direitos passam a ser concebidos como privilégios revogáveis, a sociedade civil deixa de constituir apenas um conjunto de organizações voltadas à prestação de serviços e assume o caráter de um espaço de disputa hegemônica, no sentido gramsciano. Nessa perspectiva, a sociedade civil pode transcender seu papel intermediário tradicional e se configurar como um locus de elaboração e difusão de projetos alternativos de organização social e política. Diante disso, este artigo, com base em uma abordagem qualitativa, argumenta que a principal função da sociedade civil em Estados rentistas não reside, necessariamente, na participação em confrontos diretos pelo poder político — característicos de uma *guerra de movimento* —, mas na condução de uma prolongada *guerra de posição*, orientada à erosão das bases ideológicas e culturais que sustentam a ordem rentista. Os resultados indicam que o êxito da sociedade civil nesses contextos não deve ser avaliado a partir de mudanças políticas imediatas, mas sim por sua capacidade de promover transformações no plano simbólico e normativo da sociedade, isto é, no “software” social, ao redefinir a identidade do cidadão de beneficiário passivo para sujeito ativo, portador de direitos. É por meio dessa função transformadora que a sociedade civil contribui para a construção das bases humanas e institucionais necessárias à viabilização de transições políticas substantivas em momentos críticos.

Palavras-chave: sociedade civil; democracia; Estado rentista; contrato social; guerra de posição.



INTRODUCTION

In the discourse of political development theories, modernization and globalization are often perceived as ineluctable drivers of democratization. The expectation is that improvements in economic indicators, literacy rates, urbanization, and global connectivity will naturally engender demands for political participation and governmental accountability. Rentier states, however, present a striking paradox and a persistent exception to these theories. While experiencing many outward signs of socio-economic development, these states often exhibit formidable resistance to waves of democratization, preserving their authoritarian structures for decades (Kamrava, 2018).

The secret to this resilience lies in the nature of their revenue source: economic rent. Rent, as an unearned income not derived from domestic production or societal labor, inverts the logic of governance (Hertog, 2010). The cornerstone of modern democracy was the historic bargain struck between citizens and the state over taxation; by paying taxes, citizens secured the right to oversee the government and elect their representatives. The rentier state, by eliminating or marginalizing this vital nexus, fundamentally obviates its need to secure consent and legitimacy from society. The government is no longer accountable to its citizens but primarily to global energy or resource markets. This foundational rupture transforms the state-society relationship from one predicated on mutual rights and obligations (citizenship) to a unilateral dynamic of distribution and expectation (patronage) (Scott, 2009). Within this context, an unwritten rentier social contract materializes: the state provides welfare, security, and subsidies, and in return, citizens abstain from independent political participation and from challenging the ruling authority. This structure is inherently anti-democratic, as it extinguishes the incentive for both rulers to be responsive and citizens to be demanding. This condition leads to the enfeeblement of civil society, the corrosion of the nation-state building process, and the emergence of states with totalitarian structures and scant regard for the citizen-state relationship (Valeri, 2019). However, this model is not immutable. Severe fluctuations in rentier income, demographic pressures, the rise of an educated and globally connected youth, and the spread of awareness regarding human rights and principles of good governance have created fissures in this seemingly monolithic structure. It is within these very fissures that civil society emerges as a potential agent of transformation. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), nascent social movements, independent professional associations, and digital activists all strive to carve out a space for agency beyond state control (Shafieifar & Rezaei, 2015).

This article is, therefore, structured around a central inquiry: on a playing field heavily skewed in favor of the state by the logic of rent, how precisely does civil society change the rules of the



game? Moving beyond general analyses, this paper seeks to dissect the process we term the alternative-building workshop. The argumentative hypothesis of this research is that the role of civil society in rentier states is dually dialectical: on one hand, it is severely constrained by the rentier structure, and on the other, it is the sole endogenous force capable of eroding the foundations of that very structure (Moritz, 2020). This paper argues that the impact of civil society is effectuated not through attempts at direct political power acquisition, but via a long-term, patient, and sophisticated process of bottom-up institutional and normative construction. The objective of this process is to transmute the identity of the individual in society from a passive client, a recipient of rent, into an active, rights-bearing citizen. This article will elucidate in detail how civil society institutions, functioning as a workshop, process the raw materials of diffuse discontent into coherent political demands, thereby building the foundations of a future democratic order by gradually eroding the legitimacy of the rentier state (Diwan, 2021). To this end, the first section presents a review of the relevant literature. The second outlines the theoretical foundations, including the rentier state, its associated social contract, and a redefinition of civil society within this framework. The third section explores the threefold control strategies employed by the rentier states to preserve the social contract. The fourth—the core of the article—analyses the functions and mechanisms of civil society as an alternative construction workshop. The article concludes with a comprehensive summary of the key findings.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, numerous studies have explored the capacity of civil society to shape social, political, and conceptual transformations in rentier structures. One notable work is *Revolution without Revolutionaries* by Asef Bayat (2017). By introducing the concept of creative non-revolutionary action, Bayat demonstrates how citizens in authoritarian and rentier societies challenge the existing order through everyday actions, far from classical revolutionary structures. In Bayat's view, civil society is not necessarily institutionalized but lived and hidden (Bayat, 2017). While this analysis opens new horizons in understanding social resistance in non-liberal contexts, it often remains limited to defensive and fragmented behaviors. In contrast, this article, by presenting the concept of the alternative construction workshop, defines civil society not only as a resistance actor but as a space for designing and producing alternative structures a creative and collective space where citizenship is reimaged, and the social contract is transformed.

Within this framework, Steffen Hertog (2023), in an article titled *State and Civil Society in Rentier Economies*, moves beyond the classical binary of state versus civil society and highlights



the possibility of coexistence or entanglement of civil society with rentier structures in Arab countries. Hertog's analysis, focusing on incremental reforms within the system, provides a more nuanced picture of this relationship. However, his analytical framework primarily focuses on internal interactions with the existing order and overlooks the disruptive potential of civil society (Hertog, 2023). This article, emphasizing civil society's transformative capacity outside the established order and focusing on creating alternatives to the dominant social contract, presents a more dynamic and subversive model that moves toward fundamental redesign and novel citizenization rather than reformism.

On the other hand, Donatella Della Porta and Alice Mattoni (2021), in an article published in *Social Movement Studies*, examine the relationship between alternative politics, civic participation, and the redefinition of citizenship. Focusing on European social movement experiences, they argue that civic projects based on participation simultaneously create new lifestyles and citizen identities (Della Porta & Mattoni, 2021). While valuable, this perspective is applicable to democratic and liberal contexts and has limited generalizability to rentier and authoritarian societies. The innovation of this article lies in reinterpreting the citizenization model not in conditions of open participation but in contexts of structural blockages and systemic constraints, demonstrating that even in rentier societies, civil society can function as an alternative construction workshop and generate the possibility of redefining citizen identity from within limitations.

In the Iranian context, Amir Reza Mazaheri's (2022) article, *Civil Society and the Transformation of the Social Contract in Iran*, focuses on the gradual civic resistance against the dominant rentier structure. Drawing on experiences from environmental, transparency, and justice movements, Mazaheri argues that these actions have led to the gradual erosion of the existing order (Mazaheri, 2022). The strength of this article lies in its use of local empirical data, but it remains focused on resistance and protest and does not explore civil society's role in designing a new order. Building on this, the present article moves beyond a protest-centric view of civil society, emphasizing its constructive and affirmative dimension portraying civil society not merely as reactive but as a producer of new norms, values, and institutions that move toward reconstructing the social contract and shaping an active and responsible concept of citizenship.

The synthesis of these analyses indicates that this article, in line with previous studies, adopts an interdisciplinary and integrative approach to analyze civil society as a continuous workshop for creating social and political alternatives in a rentier context. The primary innovation of this research is presenting a model that views civil society as simultaneously erosive (against the rentier order) and constructive (toward shaping a new social contract) a model in which the concept of citizenship is not only revived but practically and socially redefined.



2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. DISSECTING THE RENTIER STATE: THE ECONOMIC LOGIC OF A POLITICAL CONTRACT

To understand the challenges facing civil society, we must first deeply grasp the internal logic of the structure in which it operates. The rentier state is not merely an authoritarian state with abundant wealth; it is a specific type of political system whose economic logic uniquely defines power relations and the social contract. The economic characteristics of the rentier state directly lead to the formation of an anti-participatory political structure and a social culture that hinders collective action (Gray, 2011).

The cornerstone of modern democracy has been the historical bargaining between citizens and the state over the amount and use of taxes. By paying taxes, citizens earned the right to oversee government performance and elect representatives (Scott, 2009). The rentier state, by eliminating or marginalizing this link, fundamentally removes the need to seek societal consent and legitimacy. The government is no longer accountable to citizens but to global energy or natural resource markets. This disconnection reduces parliaments to ceremonial institutions and elections (if they exist) to displays for gaining international legitimacy (Hertog, 2010). The slogan “no taxation, no representation” becomes a fundamental component of rentierism. The rentier state becomes the largest employer, contractor, and distributor of economic privileges in the country. This immense economic power provides an unparalleled tool for engineering society and politics. Political loyalty is purchased through public sector jobs, lucrative contracts, low-interest loans, and extensive subsidies. This creates a patron-client political economy where individual advancement is achieved not through merit or innovation but through access to power networks and a share of state rent. This structure undermines collective action for public interest, as individual logic dictates that pursuing benefits through informal loyalty channels is less costly and more effective than engaging in high-risk civic activities (Valeri, 2019).

The consequences of the rentier structure are not only political and economic but also deeply cultural and psychological. The rentier mindset creates a political culture where citizens view the government not as a servant institution but as an endless source of wealth obligated to meet their needs. This culture replaces the concept of citizenship rights, which entails responsibility and participation, with a sense of entitlement based on expectation and passivity (Ghafarzadeh, 2021). This mindset is the greatest cultural obstacle to civil society, as it eliminates the intrinsic motivation



for sacrifice and effort toward collective goals, turning society into a collection of atomized individuals each seeking their share of rent.

2.2. REDEFINING CIVIL SOCIETY: FROM BUFFER ZONE TO HEGEMONIC BATTLEFIELD

Our understanding of civil society in a rentier context must go beyond a simplistic and stereotypical definition. In this context, civil society plays a far more complex and contentious role than it does in stable Western democracies. The argument of this section is that the Gramscian concept of civil society as a battlefield for cultural hegemony is far more effective than Tocqueville's view of civil society as a school for democracy (Zhang, 2014).

Alexis de Tocqueville saw civil society as a space for learning cooperation and preventing despotism. This view presupposes a relatively neutral state (Moritz, 2020). However, in rentier states, the state is not a neutral actor but a dominant force actively working to prevent the formation of independent associations. Thus, civil society cannot merely be a school, as the school itself is under attack. In contrast, Antonio Gramsci viewed civil society as one of the trenches through which the ruling class exercises its ideological and cultural hegemony (via institutions like schools, media, and churches). However, this same space can become a battlefield where counter-hegemonic forces challenge the dominant narrative and offer an alternative worldview. This perspective is highly suitable for analyzing rentier states). The rentier state promotes the ideology of welfare in exchange for silence through media and dependent institutions. Independent civil society, in contrast, seeks to break this hegemony by exposing corruption, inefficiency, and repression, offering a counter-narrative based on rights, dignity, and active citizenship. Thus, every civic action from publishing a human rights report to launching an environmental campaign is a political act in this ideological battle (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010). The strategy of civil society in these states is not necessarily a direct, revolutionary confrontation (war of movement) but rather a long-term, attritional war of position .

2.3. THEORETICAL LINK: WHY CIVIL SOCIETY IS A PREREQUISITE FOR DEMOCRACY IN RENTIER STATES

In the absence of a vibrant civil society, any attempt to establish formal democracy (such as holding elections) in a rentier state is doomed to fail or become a façade democracy. Civil society builds the foundation for genuine democracy by fulfilling three fundamental functions that the rentier state systematically undermines:



a) Producing Social Capital: Robert Putnam demonstrated that effective democracy requires a high level of trust, cooperation, and civic networks. The rentier state destroys social capital by promoting patronage, distrust, and individual competition for rent. Civil society, by bringing people together around shared goals, creates a space for fostering trust and mutual cooperation. This trust is the social glue that enables collective action, without which society remains vulnerable to the state's divisive manipulations (Putnam, 2000).

b) Creating Independent Public Opinion: As Habermas argued, democracy requires a public sphere where citizens can freely discuss public issues. The rentier state destroys this space by monopolizing media and suppressing free speech. Civil society (especially through modern communication tools) breaks this monopoly and creates alternative spaces for dialogue. Without independent public opinion, the will of the people, which democracy claims to represent, can never form, and only the state's voice is heard (Gengler & Lambert, 2020).

c) Formulating and Aggregating Demands: Democracy is the process of peacefully managing conflicting demands. In a rentier state, demands are either suppressed or expressed through opaque patronage channels. Civil society, by identifying issues, formulating policy solutions, and representing the interests of various groups (women, workers, minorities, environmentalists), gives these scattered demands a coherent political form. This process is a prerequisite for the formation of genuine political parties and meaningful political competition (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010).

3. DEMOCRACY AT THE HEART OF RENTIER STATES

In rentier states, which derive most of their income from natural resources like oil and gas, civil society can play a critical role in improving democratic conditions. These states, due to their lack of reliance on public taxes, typically exhibit less accountability and transparency and gain greater power to control resources and impose political repression.

3.1. CIVIL SOCIETY AS THE DRIVING FORCE OF DEMOCRACY IN RENTIER STATES

Civil society can act as the driving force of democracy in these states. By promoting public awareness of citizenship rights, social and political issues, and educating people about the principles of democracy and justice, civil society can help citizens become more aware of their conditions. This awareness can strengthen the sense of participation in political and social affairs and encourage people to demand greater accountability and transparency from the government. Civil society organizations, media, and independent groups can demand greater transparency in financial and



administrative affairs by monitoring government activities. These entities can pursue the exposure of corruption and financial misconduct, compelling the government to be accountable. This is particularly significant in rentier states, where a large portion of revenues is outside direct public control and tied to natural resources. Rentier states often tend to concentrate wealth from natural resources in the hands of specific groups or political elites. Civil society can counter economic and social inequalities by promoting social justice and advocating for the equitable redistribution of resources, pushing for policies that benefit the majority rather than select powerful groups (Cammett, 2018).

Through creating networks and coalitions of independent groups, civil society can contribute to developing and strengthening democratic institutions. These entities can fight for improving democratic structures and principles in countries facing political repression. Civil society's efforts in defending human rights, freedom of expression, and civil liberties play a key role in improving democracy in rentier states (Khatib & Lust, 2014). Civil society can act as a supporter of social and protest movements, which often arise from public discontent with the status quo and demand social justice, economic transparency, and political change. By supporting these movements and legitimate public demands, civil society can strengthen social institutions and increase public participation. In rentier states, civil society can play a pivotal role in monitoring the management and use of natural resources. Civil organizations and grassroots groups can advocate for laws and policies that mandate government transparency regarding revenues from natural resources and their allocation, preventing corruption and misuse and keeping the public informed (Woertz, 2020).

3.2. CAPACITY-BUILDING IN CIVIL SOCIETY: A PREREQUISITE FOR DEMOCRATIZATION

Capacity building in civil society is a fundamental prerequisite for moving toward democratization, especially in rentier states. As an intermediary institution between the people and the government, civil society can strengthen democratic institutions and increase political participation through capacity-building, leading to changes in power structures and the development of a democratic space. Capacity-building involves developing and strengthening NGOs, unions, associations, and other civil entities that can play roles in advocacy, government oversight, and supporting citizenship rights. These entities can enhance their impact on democratic processes through training human resources, improving management and planning, and expanding networks (Shipley, 2012).

One critical aspect of capacity-building is training and educating civil leaders and activists. These leaders, equipped with leadership, negotiation, and mobilization skills, can advance civil society programs and activities. Trained and capable leaders can form social coalitions and garner public attention and participation for democratic changes. Capacity-building also involves creating strong networks and coalitions among various groups and institutions. These networks can be effective in pursuing shared goals, sharing resources, and coordinating activities. Broad coalitions at local and national levels help civil society resist potential pressures and repressions from rentier states and amplify the people's voice in a more unified and widespread manner (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010). Another goal of capacity-building is developing oversight tools and accountability mechanisms. Civil society can contribute to transparency and reduce corruption by establishing institutions to monitor government performance and decision-making. Strong oversight of state resources and budgets, particularly in rentier states plagued by widespread financial corruption, is an effective tool for increasing government accountability (Mazaheri, 2022).

Capacity-building in civil society through international connections and global support can play a significant role in promoting democracy. By engaging with international and human rights organizations, civil society can benefit from global support and exert greater pressure for democratic changes on governments (Yom, 2016). Capacity-building is a prerequisite for democratization in rentier states, encompassing institution-building, leader training, solidarity networks, and strengthening oversight tools. Through capacity-building, civil society can enhance public awareness, support citizenship rights, and pursue transparency and accountability (Gengler & Lambert, 2020).

4. ANATOMY OF CONTROL: STATE STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN THE RENTIER CONTRACT

The rentier state employs a sophisticated, multi-layered control spectrum to preserve its social contract and curb counter-hegemonic forces, particularly civil society. These strategies, ranging from the softest financial tools to the harshest security and ideological measures, operate in combination to create an iron cage around civil society. Understanding these strategies is essential for grasping the nature of the “war of position” (Zhang, 2014).

4.1. WEALTH: CO-OPTATION AND FINANCIAL CONTAINMENT (THE GOLDEN CAGE STRATEGY)



This is the most dangerous and effective strategy of the rentier state, as it hollows out resistance from within. Using its vast rentier resources, the state makes civil society dependent rather than confronting it directly. This strategy has three main branches:

1. The state establishes pseudo-non-governmental organizations that are budgeted and managed by the government. These fake entities occupy civic space, absorb resources, and act as false representatives of civil society in domestic and international forums, marginalizing the voices of independent organizations.

2. The state offers substantial budgets to existing civil organizations, but these funds are conditional on avoiding political or critical activities. This places many organizations at a crossroads of “survival with dependence” or “independence with destruction”, turning them into harmless service providers (Hertog, 2010). The lack of independent resources makes civil society highly vulnerable to the state’s co-optation strategy .

3. By offering government positions, economic privileges, and social status to prominent civil society leaders and activists, the state removes them from the ranks of critics and integrates them into the ruling system. This depletes civil society of experienced and charismatic leaders and fosters distrust among activists (Valeri, 2019).

4.2. FORCE: LEGAL AND SECURITY REPRESSION (THE IRON FIST STRATEGY)

When co-optation fails or is insufficient to contain more radical groups, the rentier state resorts to overt repression. Financial independence from society allows the state to fund a massive, loyal security apparatus without fear of domestic economic backlash (e.g., tax strikes). This repression takes various forms:

1. Enacting association and anti-crime laws with vague and broad definitions that criminalize independent civic activities and foreign funding. The process of registering an NGO becomes an obstacle-ridden path requiring approval from multiple security agencies to prevent the formation of independent nuclei.

2. Wiretapping, hacking websites, repeatedly summoning activists to security agencies, and creating a general atmosphere of fear and distrust deter ordinary citizens from joining civic activities.

3. Arbitrary arrests, unfair trials with heavy security charges, and violent suppression of gatherings and protests raise the cost of participation significantly. This forces citizens into a

rational calculation where the cost of participation appears high and its benefits uncertain (Yom, 2016).

4.3. DECEPTION: DELEGITIMIZATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE (THE LABELING STRATEGY)

The rentier state continuously seeks to discredit independent civil organizations in public opinion to isolate them from society. This psychological warfare rests on two main pillars:

1. The most common and effective label is accusing civil activists of espionage, foreign agency, or implementing foreign agendas. Since these organizations, due to internal restrictions, sometimes rely on international funding, this accusation is easily leveled and, by appealing to nationalist sentiments, can alienate them from society .

2. The state portrays civic activities as causes of chaos, insecurity, and instability .By invoking the experiences of unstable regional countries, the state promotes the message that the cost of democracy is chaos, and the existing security, however limited, is preferable to political freedoms .

3. These threefold control strategies create a highly hostile environment for civil society, placing it in a two-front war: confronting the state’s sophisticated strategies and battling the cultural and structural barriers rooted in society itself .

5. MECHANISMS FOR RECONSTRUCTING CITIZENSHIP

Despite the bleak outlook described in the previous section, civil society in rentier states is not doomed to passivity. By devising intelligent and adaptive strategies, these institutions not only ensure their survival but also perform critical functions in gradually eroding the foundations of rentier authoritarianism and laying the groundwork for democratic change (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010). This section argues that civil society in this context avoids direct confrontation and focuses on an indirect strategy aimed at transforming the societal software (values, norms, awareness) as a prelude to transforming its hardware (political structure). This process is the essence of the “alternative construction workshop”. This workshop relies on four main mechanisms, each directly targeting one of the pillars of the rentier social contract.

5.1. REDEFINING DEMANDS FROM FAVOR TO RIGHT

This mechanism directly confronts the “rentier mindset”. The goal is to shift the individual’s relationship with the state from a vertical one (dependence and expectation) to a horizontal one



(rights and mutual responsibilities). This is a long-term educational and transformative process to build democratic citizens. Civil organizations, through workshops, simple pamphlets, and legal consultations, familiarize citizens with their fundamental rights under domestic constitutions and international covenants. These programs help people become more aware of their conditions and better understand their rights and responsibilities. When a citizen learns that the right to employment, housing, a healthy environment, or freedom of expression is not a favor granted by the state but a fundamental right, the logic of dialogue with the state changes (Bayat, 2017).

This shift enables individuals to frame their demands not as requests for favors from a patron but as claims to legal rights from a servant institution. This change in language is not merely superficial but a fundamental shift in the symbolic power balance between citizen and state (Bayat, 2017). This process strengthens the sense of advocacy in society and exerts greater pressure on governments to adhere to democratic principles.

5.2. BREAKING THE NARRATIVE MONOPOLY THROUGH ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SPACES

The most critical function of civil society is challenging the rentier state's informational hegemony. By controlling mainstream media, the state presents an engineered reality of welfare and legitimacy. Civil society bursts this bubble by creating parallel spaces for dialogue. The internet and social media have become civil society's primary weapons in this battle. Blogs, Telegram channels, and other social media platforms have become platforms for independent journalists and human rights activists to discuss issues taboo in official media, such as power structures, social justice, or minority rights (Gengler & Lambert, 2020). These activities break the spiral of silence, showing dissatisfied individuals that they are not alone in their views a psychological prerequisite for collective action. These alternative spaces foster independent public opinion and dismantle the state's narrative monopoly. Additionally, art and culture become alternative languages for critique; a film, play, or novel can symbolically challenge power structures and promote democratic values (Khatib & Lust, 2014).

5.3. EMPOWERING CITIZENS: FROM CLIENT TO CITIZEN

Civil society directly confronts the rentier mindset. The goal is to shift the individual's relationship with the state from a vertical one (dependence and expectation) to a horizontal one (rights and mutual responsibilities). This is a long-term educational and transformative process to build democratic citizens. Civil organizations, through workshops, simple pamphlets, and legal



consultations, familiarize citizens with their fundamental rights under domestic constitutions and international covenants. This enables individuals to frame their demands (e.g., right to employment, housing, clean air) not as requests for favors from the state but as claims to legal rights. This change in language represents a fundamental shift in the symbolic power balance between citizen and state (Bayat, 2017).

Civil organizations themselves act as small laboratories of democracy. Within these organizations, members learn skills such as dialogue, tolerating opposing views, collective decision-making, internal elections, and holding leaders accountable. These micro-experiences are antidotes to the authoritarian and individualistic political culture dominating society, fostering a cadre of individuals familiar with democratic principles and practices (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010).

5.4. ERODING RENTIER LEGITIMACY THROUGH OVERSIGHT AND WATCHDOG FUNCTIONS

The legitimacy of the rentier state rests on one main pillar: its ability to provide (apparent) welfare and security (Valeri, 2019). Civil society's oversight function directly attacks this pillar by exposing inefficiency, corruption, and repression, revealing that the rentier social contract is not a fair deal.

Investigative journalists and civil organizations document and expose systemic corruption and mismanagement of rentier revenues by monitoring budgets, government projects, and contracts. These exposés show that the state, far from being a benevolent patron, appropriates national wealth for the benefit of ruling elites. Each revelation creates doubt in parts of society about the state's official narrative, raising the question of whether the promised welfare truly reaches society or disappears in cycles of corruption. This oversight and transparency can make people more sensitive to political issues and create greater motivation for political participation. Civil organizations can advocate for laws mandating government transparency regarding natural resource revenues and their allocation. This is particularly effective in rentier states plagued by widespread financial corruption, serving as a tool to increase accountability (Woertz, 2020). The rentier state often presents stability and security as its greatest achievement and justification for political restrictions. Human rights organizations, by meticulously documenting cases of human rights violations from arbitrary arrests and unfair trials to restrictions on freedom of expression reveal the hidden human cost of this stability (Yom, 2016).

These reports, often published with the support of international organizations, raise the ethical question in society: Is security without dignity and freedom worthwhile?. They show that the rentier

social contract is not only in exchange for political silence but sometimes at the cost of sacrificing fundamental human rights. This function challenges the state's security narrative and undermines its legitimacy domestically and internationally (Mazaheri, 2022).

5.5. PRODUCING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN SMALL LABORATORIES OF DEMOCRACY

The rentier state systematically destroys social capital trust and norms of mutual cooperation by promoting individualism, competition for resources, and patronage. This turns society into a collection of atomized individuals incapable of collective action. Civil society acts as an antidote to this condition, creating spaces to rebuild trust and cooperation (Putnam, 2000).

Civil organizations themselves function as small laboratories of democracy. Within these organizations, members learn skills such as dialogue, tolerating opposing views, collective decision-making, internal elections, and holding leaders accountable. These skills are precisely those needed for a democratic system (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010). Citizens who learn in a local association how to work together for a common goal, manage disagreements, and hold leaders accountable are practicing for citizenship on a larger scale. As Robert Putnam argued, civic networks create a space for fostering trust and mutual cooperation by bringing people together around shared goal. In a society deeply distrustful due to the logic of rent, voluntary activities in a charitable organization, environmental group, or cultural association can help rebuild this trust. When individuals from different social groups work together toward a common goal, they learn to trust one another. This trust is the social glue that enables collective action. Without this social capital, society remains vulnerable to the state's divisive manipulations. By producing this capital, civil society builds the foundation for a healthy, participatory society (Mazaheri, 2022).

5.6. NETWORKING AND COALITION-BUILDING TO OVERCOME DIVISION

Against a centralized and powerful state whose primary strategy is divide and rule, isolation is fatal for civil groups. The state prefers to keep groups separated by identity (workers, women, students, environmentalists) to prevent the formation of a united front. Civil society's intelligent strategy is to transform from a collection of scattered islands into a connected archipelago. Networking increases resistance to repression and enhances bargaining power.

Civil society neutralizes the state's divisive strategy by forming coalitions beyond identity and sectoral lines. For example, a campaign against an unscientific dam that destroys the environment can bring together an alliance of environmental activists, local farmers whose lands are at risk,



expert engineers opposing the project, and human rights activists concerned about forced displacement. Such a broad coalition has a larger social base and is harder and costlier for the state to suppress. These strong networks and coalitions help civil society resist potential pressures and repressions from rentier states and amplify the people's voice in a more unified and widespread manner, contributing to the development and strengthening of democratic institutions (Cavatorta & Durac, 2010).

Engaging with international organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or global labor federations creates a vital protective layer for domestic activists. These organizations can support civil society in various ways: by publishing international reports and launching global campaigns, they raise the reputational cost of repressing domestic activists for a rentier state sensitive to its international image (Gengler & Lambert, 2020).

These organizations can provide specialized training in digital security, documentation, or international lobbying, as well as limited and secure financial resources. These international connections and global support can exert greater pressure for democratic changes on governments (Yom, 2016). Support from a reputable international institution can counter the state's accusations of foreign dependency and validate the legitimacy of these activities globally. These four mechanisms collectively demonstrate an intelligent, multifaceted strategy for gradual change. Instead of directly attacking the fortress of power, civil society undermines its foundations, questions its legitimacy, and simultaneously enhances society's capacity to embrace and implement a democratic alternative (Bayat, 2017).

5.7. HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDY: THE RIGHT TO CLEAN AIR CAMPAIGN

Imagine a small environmental civil organization in a rentier state launching a "Right to Clean Air" campaign. Initially, the government and its affiliated media either ignore the issue or dismiss it as a luxury concern of the affluent class. Rather than pleading with the government to "please clean the air", the organization reframes the issue: it redefines clean air not as a governmental favor but as a constitutional right to a healthy environment. Through workshops and public outreach, it educates and convinces ordinary citizens that their children's respiratory illnesses are not mere misfortunes but the result of the state policies and polluting industries violating their fundamental rights. Thereby, the prevailing discourse shifts from mere requests to legally justified demands (Mazaheri, 2022).

They use social media to share daily air pollution indices, personal stories of respiratory disease victims, and simplified scientific articles about pollution sources (Gengler & Lambert, 2020). This

breaks the state's narrative that the situation is under control. Investigative journalists linked to the campaign reveal documents showing that a state-owned factory avoided installing standard filters by bribing officials. This exposé links inefficiency and corruption, questioning the state's legitimacy as a benevolent patron. The campaign forms a coalition with women's rights groups (addressing pollution's impact on mothers and children), doctors (providing medical reports), and sports groups (unable to practice outdoors). This coalition transforms the issue from a purely environmental concern into a broad, public demand (Gengler & Lambert, 2020). Even if the government does not take immediate large-scale action, the campaign succeeds in: a) transforming thousands of citizens from passive consumers to active advocates in the health domain; b) undermining the state's legitimacy in managing resources and public health; c) creating a network of activists and experts that can mobilize for other issues in the future. This is a victory in the war of position (Zhang, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the relationship between civil society and the rentier state compels us to move beyond a simplistic understanding of democratic transition and toward a complex, multi-layered, and often paradoxical reality. The battle for democracy in rentier states is less a political struggle to seize state power and more a cultural, social, and ideological war of attrition to capture the soul of society. In this contest, civil society is both the principal battlefield and the most critical combatant. The rentier state, leveraging its unearned wealth, engineers an authoritarian tranquility a peace procured by purchasing silence, undermining solidarity, and promoting passivity. This system reduces citizens to dependent clients and rights to negotiable privileges. In the face of this immense machinery of co-optation and control, civil society functions as an alternative-building workshop, striving to identify, neutralize, and replace the deleterious codes of the rentier culture with new codes predicated on active citizenship.

As demonstrated in detail herein, the strategies of this workshop are sophisticated and indirect. Instead of confronting tanks, it wages a war of narratives, wresting the monopoly on truth from the state by creating alternative public spheres. Instead of seeking power, it focuses on empowering citizens, transforming them from passive consumers into active claimants. Instead of high-risk mass movements, it concentrates on networking and coalition-building to enhance societal resilience against pressure. And through its monitoring and watchdog functions, it strips away the benevolent façade of the rentier state, exposing its inefficiency and corruption. Perhaps the most significant achievement of civil society in these states is keeping the democratic ideal alive and practically

reconstructing the concept of citizenship. In conditions where the entire state apparatus is designed to propagate the message that There Is No Alternative (TINA), the very existence and activity of civil society proclaims that an alternative is both possible and desirable. These activities, even if they do not yield tangible political changes in the short term, are constructing the human and social bedrock of a future democratic order. This process cultivates a cadre of future leaders, generates the social capital necessary for cooperation, and raises public consciousness to a point where it is no longer willing to accept the trade-off of welfare for silence.

Therefore, the success of civil society in rentier states must not be measured by the yardstick of classic revolutions or rapid political shifts. Its success lies in its resilience, its creativity, and its capacity to wage a long and patient war of position. At moments when economic crises—such as oil price volatility—or political ruptures weaken the rentier state and open windows of political opportunity, it is civil society, equipped with the human and intellectual capital it has cultivated over years, that is poised to seize the moment and steer society toward a meaningful and sustainable democratic transition. As we have shown, despite significant structural and institutional constraints, civil societies remain the only endogenous force capable of gradually undermining the foundations of the rentier social contract and laying the groundwork for an authentic democratic order.

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