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Locating Civil Society's Anti-Corruption Role Through Configurational Analysis: Towards A Policy and Research Agenda¹

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Abstract³

While corruption studies abound, there is a dearth of scholarship that deals with corruption from the perspective of set relations. A configurational analysis of corruption is helpful in understanding the complexity of such phenomenon. For one, given the complex nature of corruption, democratic governments and civil society are prompted to address it via holistic and integrative anti-corruption strategies. This complexity seems to resonate with what qualitative comparative analysts hold regarding the import of contexts and with the configurational character of much of social life. From the perspective of set-theoretic, configurational analysis, in particular qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), corruption should also thus be seen as a conjunctural, equifinal, asymmetrical, and multifinal phenomenon.

Keywords: anti-corruption, corruption, civil society, qualitative comparative analysis, set relations.

Introduction

The scholarship on civil society-corruption linkage reveals three important strands: (1) the optimists, who believe that civil society's impact is undeniable (Mungiu-Pippidi & Dusu, 2011); (2) the skeptics, who claim that civil society have become corrupt and or conduits for corruption (Greenlee, Fischer, Gordon and Keating, 2007); and (3) those who claim that the role of civil society is conditional on several factors (Donaghy, 2011; Uhlin, 2009).

The "optimist" literature asserts that civil society indecisively plays an active anti-corruption role in several respects. Foremost, they are information providers, reporting on governmental malfeasance and raising public awareness on these (Grimes, 2013); they serve as vehicles for association where the mass public articulate their grievances and organize calls for transparency and accountability (Tusalem, 2007); they diagnose and monitor the performance of public institutions and thus also provide a system of checks and balances (Mungiu-Pippidi & Dusu, 2011); and they partake in anti-corruption policy advocacy and the redesign of anti-corruption institutions (Wampler & Avritzer, 2004).

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The “skeptics”, on the other hand, caution that civil society organizations can also be corrupt and this affects their anti-corruption efforts. This claim springs from two important questions on internal accountability and autonomy. For one, civil society organizations are not insulated from challenges to internal accountability mechanisms (Townsend & Townsend, 2004; Greenlee, Fischer, Gordon & Keating, 2007). Second, civil society organizations’ autonomy is compromised due to them being embedded in the state’s bureaucratic network and their reliance on funding from either the state or external donors (Lorentzen, 2004 in Saglie and Sivesind, 2018).

The “conditionality” literature supposedly narrows the division between the two preceding bodies. This strand engages in the pertinent question of what conditions civil society to contribute to anti-corruption, be it those that the “optimists” consider as strengths of civil society or what the “skeptics” claim as its weaknesses and challenges. Specifically, it looks at conditions under which civil society may affect anti-corruption (see Donaghy, 2011; Uhlin, 2009, 2010).

From the perspective of set-theoretic, configurational analysis, in particular qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), corruption is conjunctural, equifinal, asymmetrical, and multifinal. Similarly, the conditionality of civil society’s anti-corruption role is explained from the standpoint of QCA; that is, such role is dependent on the presence or absence of the other specified conditions. Context is also central in this regard. In what follows, a review is conducted on the larger democracy-corruption nexus scholarship and the supposed anti-corruption role of civil society in different regimes.

Differential role for civil society? The case of different regimes

Looking at corruption and anti-corruption in regimes of different types is one way to understand corruption as a political phenomenon. Amundsen and Jackson (2021: 1) claim that “the nature of a regime or polity affects both the nature of corruption in the country and the abuses of anti-corruption interventions.” They continue that such regimes differ, among many others, as to the type and scale of corrupt practices that are mostly in place, the government’s power and capacity to curb such practices, and in the independence and capacity of institutions and social actors outside of the government to pursue much needed anti-corruption reforms (Amundsen & Jackson, 2021: 22). Consequently, they propose that while anti-corruption interventions transpire by means of the introduction of reforms to political institutions, building capacity of enforcement institutions, and reinforcement of civil society oversight, they succeed only to the extent that the nature of the polity is considered.

In emerging democracies, or those that are in transition, corruption is a transitional phenomenon given that procedural practices have yet to be founded on firm liberal culture and effective institutions

(Harris-White and White, 1996; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). Among intermediate democracies, the eventual consolidation of democratic institutions would reduce corruption (Sung, 2004). In fully consolidated democracies, anti-corruption is usually a government agenda promoted and supported by the electorate, media, and civil society. While corruption is sporadic and limited in these polities, anti-corruption primarily centers on refinement of laws, of investigation, and of enforcement (Amundsen & Jackson, 2021). In backsliding democracies, or autocratizing states, anti-corruption is increasingly a concern. As Amundsen and Jackson (2021: 4) note, “because de-democratizing leaders and would-be autocrats benefit from corruption, traditional governance-focused reforms are rolled back, and traditional anti-corruption measures can be hijacked and weaponized.” Therefore, as the case of extractive political corruption shows, corruption serves a political purpose beyond personal pecuniary enrichment. In illiberal regimes, the purpose of corruption is to curb citizen influence, reduce accountability, subvert institutional checks and balances, and establish a non-competitive political system. Thus, anti-corruption is of strategic importance only if it forms part of the broader domestic agenda and international alliance to halt de-democratization (Amundsen & Jackson, 2021: 3).

The supposed anti-corruption role of civil society in democracies is as complex as the relationship between democracy and corruption itself. Under certain circumstances, civil society may strengthen and stabilize democracy (Boulding & Nelson-Núñez, 2014). Rose-Ackerman (2007) posit that it is only when well-functioning democratic institutions are in place that growth and transformation can begin. Under this pretext, the anti-corruption role of civil society primarily rests on the presence and consolidation of other democratic institutions. Boulding (2014: 37) acknowledges that while civil society may promote political participation in all minimally democratic contexts, the type of participation that emerges will depend on the quality of democracy specifically the extent to which elections are competitive and perceived to be free and fair. Thus, where these institutions in place are strong and well developed, civil society is thought to contribute to anti-corruption.

On the other hand, Hira (2016) notes that while democracy should encourage more competition and alteration of clientelistic networks through civil society, having a democracy is not a requirement for anti-corruption. Cornell and Grimes (2015) caution that at times, civil society also contributes to political instability. Thus, under certain deteriorating conditions, civil society may as much be a burden as a help (Encarnación, 2012). Particularly where dissent is risky, corruption issues are one way newly formed assertive social groups take regimes to task without directly challenging their claims to rule (Hao & Johnston, 2005 in Johnston, 2009: 5). In the case of competitive authoritarian regimes, dissenting social forces turn to civil society as they have no access to political institutions

to democratically challenge the government. Unlike in closed autocracies, competitive authoritarian regimes engage rather than eliminate civil society as they cannot ignore societal consent and legitimacy and rule by pure coercion (Yabanci, 2019: 286). The case of autocratizing states is no different. Understanding how and where autocratization or de-democratization begins is crucial in understanding the severe consequences of democratic backsliding for anti-corruption (Amundsen & Jackson, 2021: 6). The Varieties of Democracy (2020) report notes that in countries that slid in the last ten years, the scope for media and civil society (including political opposition) were first restricted, and then followed by elections. Amundsen and Jackson (2021: 8) highlight the double bind of corruption in these regimes: “corruption becomes more systemic even as democratic checks and balances are eroded”.

Autocratization can thus lead to the possibility of a co-opted civil society. This has serious repercussions to the anti-corruption role of civil society. First, the growth and diversification of civil society in such regimes (including in competitive authoritarian ones) cannot guarantee for its ability to become agents of democratic change (Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011; Yabanci, 2019). Second, given the politicization of civil society, the roles of the civil society are contingent to the preferences of the government. Under faux collaboration (façade of cooperation) and non-collaborative co-presence (shared governance role without compromise-based solutions), active civil engagement may produce suboptimal outcomes. Worse, civil society may hinder long-term goals of anti-corruption, including democratization and effective governance (Zaloznaya, et al., 2018).

Thus, the importance of context, in this case the polity or regime, in understanding both corruption and the anti-corruption role of civil society cannot be understated. Tilly (2003) opines that civil society lends organizational structure to social interactions and this relational power may be channeled into different forms of political action in different political regimes. Any study of civil society, if it were to contribute to our further understanding of the corruption-democracy nexus, must consider the characteristics of the institutional context and the regime. Boulding’s (2014: 676) pertinent question succinctly captures this: “which institutional conditions might influence whether civil society is inclined to work toward developing clientelistic relationships with politicians, or conversely, when they may be more likely to employ other strategies for serving members’ needs?” Moreover, given this, one may ask, does civil society play the same anti-corruption role in autocratizing states as it does in democratic contexts?

Set-theoretic method in corruption research: A missing piece?

Corruption is studied not only from different academic disciplines and theoretical perspectives but also from a myriad of empirical approaches. While this is the case, most of corruption research is rather statistical and cross-sectional and less comparative (Johnston, 2009). There is also a long tradition for in-depth case studies that explore it. However, despite the influx of articles and scholarly publications on corruption, set-theoretic method, particularly Qualitative Comparative Analysis, is yet to be applied extensively. Only few studies on the configurations of corruption have so far been done (Stevens, 2016; Ingrams, 2018; Zimelis, 2019; Dunlop et. al, 2020). This, despite the increase of QCA applications since its introduction in 1987 by Charles Ragin.

Missing from the current scholarship is the treatment of corruption as characterized by causal complexity in set-theoretic terms (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). From the standpoint of QCA, corruption (or anti-corruption) implies conjunctural causation, equifinality, asymmetry, and multifinality. First, corruption results from conjunctural causation; that is, it is a product of a combination of different conditions. Corruption is also equifinal: there are possibly multiple pathways to corruption. Third, the absence of conditions that lead to corruption may not necessarily lead to its absence; thus, corruption is asymmetrical. Lastly, corruption implies multifinality: the conditions leading to corruption may be causally relevant for both the presence of corruption and its absence.

Most of the studies thus far treat corruption symmetrically and this is where QCA can contribute further. The symmetrical treatment of corruption assumes that what causes corruption is the same mirror image of what could bring about anti-corruption. Addressing the causes of corruption is not necessarily the same that would bring about an effective anti-corruption. In set-relational terms, the conditions for the presence of corruption are possibly different for its absence. Perhaps, this is what Zimelis (2020: 298) pushes for when claiming that anti-corruption should also be studied and not just corruption, to wit: “we need to study specifically the elements of anti-corruption, especially those that lead to more effective anti-corruption, to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the causes and remedies to corruption”. The analysis of the contextual dependencies of corruption remains as an important agenda in corruption research. However, the identification of which conditions and their configuration leads to both the absence and/or presence of corruption remain relatively underexplored.

Conclusion

A set-theoretic study of corruption contributes to anti-corruption research in three ways. First, it addresses two important gaps in anti-corruption research: (1) the need for an integrative approach to

anti-corruption and (2) the lack of understanding of anti-corruption as an equifinal, asymmetrical, and conjunctural phenomenon. The first can possibly be addressed by a combination of individual level (micro) and national level (macro) social and political institutional conditions that are considered relevant for the outcome of interest: corruption or anti-corruption. Through qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), the second is addressed via the development of a framework for necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the outcome.

Secondly, a set-theoretic study addresses an issue in the study of civil society's role in anti-corruption; that is, civil society's effect may be conditional on several factors. This is addressed by the identification of specific conditions that combine with civil society for an outcome (anti-corruption or corruption). Third, it focuses on the role of context in anti-corruption and attempts to address the larger corruption-democracy nexus debate in this regard through an analysis of the outcome in two different regime transformation types: autocratization and democratization.

Given the complex nature of corruption, democratic governments and civil society are prompted to address it via holistic and integrative anti-corruption strategies. This complexity seems to resonate with what qualitative comparative analysts hold regarding the import of contexts and with the configurational character of much of social life. While this is the case, the analysis of the contextual dependencies of (anti-)corruption in set-relational terms (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012) remains wanting.

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