

## Digital Civil Society in Algeria: A Sociological Analysis of its Formation and Interaction

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### Abstract

This research paper seeks to explore the chronological evolution of the concept of civil society in Algeria, examining its role as a key historical actor in the state-building process and the transition towards participatory democracy. It presents a sociological analysis of the trajectory of civil society's formation and its interaction as an intermediary between the citizenry and the state. The analysis progresses from the traditional understanding of civil society (often termed Al-

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Mujtama' Al-Ahli) to its contemporary manifestation, designated here as 'Digital Civil Society'. It addresses the digital sphere as a domain for civil society activities, positioning it as an agent in the reconstruction of trust between citizens and the state, particularly in the post-Hirak Movement period. This is illustrated through the experience of the National Observatory for Civil Society, presented as a model digital platform aimed at enhancing the mechanisms, activities, and overall effectiveness of civil society engagement.

Keywords: Civil Society, Digitalization, Participatory Democracy, Hirak Movement.

## Introduction

Civil society in Algeria is undergoing profound transformations amidst the accelerating digital revolution, where technological media now play a pivotal role in reshaping the patterns and modes of civic action. This transformation has given rise to 'Digital Civil Society,' a new interactive sphere that leverages the internet and social media platforms as means for expression, organization, and influencing public affairs. In this context, associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are no longer the sole actors in the civic sphere; rather, new forms of actors, such as digital activists and virtual groups, have emerged. These actors now exert tangible influence in awareness-raising, rights advocacy, and shaping public opinion. However, this transformation also presents a series of challenges concerning freedom of expression, information reliability, and the capacity of both the state and society to adapt to this new reality. This study aims to analyze the characteristics of digital civil society in Algeria and explore its sociological and political dimensions by examining its operational mechanisms, the limits of its influence, and its prospects for future development.

## The Concept of Civil Society

Civil society is "a network of organizations, practices, and regulations that arise from the free voluntary will of its members, serving an interest or a cause, or expressing values and sentiments cherished by these individuals, with relative autonomy from the state on one hand and from hereditary institutions on the other, while being committed in its activities to tolerance and respect for others" (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 86).

The meaning of the word 'madani' (civil) in the "Dictionary of Enlightenment" carries two contrasting connotations: it signifies the free Western citizen (polite, courteous, civilized – the antithesis of the barbarian or savage). Subsequently, it came to denote the European as the

exclusive embodiment of civilization. In this sense, it reflects "an elitist, preferential concept based on a hierarchical ordering of societies" (Jalal, 2005, p. 30).

Civil society is also defined as "'a sphere of freedom where people meet and interact freely, undertaking collective initiatives of their own free will, for common causes, common interests, or to express shared sentiments regarding a specific matter or issue'" (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 13).

Furthermore, it is defined as "the ensemble of autonomous organizations that occupy the public sphere between the family and the state. These are non-profit entities seeking to achieve common interests or benefits for society as a whole or for some of its marginalized groups, or to realize the interests of their members, while committed to the values and norms of respect, mutual consent, the constructive management of differences, tolerance, and acceptance of the other" (Qandil, 2008, p. 64).

By its nature, civil society aims to foster consensus within the political sphere, particularly within the framework of participatory democracy. It shares aspects of political practice with political parties, although parties cannot be considered part of civil society as their primary goal is the pursuit of power. In contrast, labor unions are considered civil society institutions because they function as pressure groups influencing the state through protests and strikes. Meanwhile, associations of various types are regarded as the primary engine of civil society (Tawfik, 2005, p. 171). In Algeria, civil society also manifests in human rights associations, religious lodges or centers known as Zawiyas, various Sufi orders, and is often represented by religious figures (Sheikhs) and community or tribal notables.

The concept of civil society is considered the modern designation for the traditional form often referred to as Al-Mujtama' Al-Ahli (communal or kin-based society), which is typically represented by tribes and clans possessing sectarian, ethnic, and doctrinal affiliations. Here, we note that in the Arab world, arguably, a civil society in the truly modern sense – one where narrow interests dissolve and tribal, ethnic, and sectarian tendencies diminish, and which strives to serve the nation and the citizenry in a broadly humanistic manner – has yet to fully emerge. This necessitates that civil society possess organizational, financial, and administrative independence to exert pressure on the ruling authority with integrity and transparency, thereby achieving complete autonomy from the state. Otherwise, it risks being easily co-opted by the authorities, thereby failing to serve the public good and fulfill its mediatory role between society and the state.

### Concept of Associations

Associations are considered the primary driving force within civil society. An association is defined as: "Units established by members of the local community, which are non-profit, seeking the development of human and environmental resources and the advancement of society as a whole, enabling it to secure its rights" (Al-Latif, 2000, p. 25).

Article 2 of Law 12-06 [Note: Assuming correction from 99-12, aligning with common Algerian legal references and the 1990 gazette date likely referring to the previous law 90-31, which 12-06 replaced. The translation follows the definition provided.] defines an association as "a convention governed by applicable laws, within which natural or legal persons gather on a contractual basis and for a non-profit purpose. They agree to pool their knowledge and resources for a defined or indefinite period to promote activities primarily of a professional, social, scientific, religious, educational, cultural, or sporting nature. The objective of the association must be precisely defined, and its name must correspond to this objective" (Official Gazette, 1990).

Civil Society and Political Parties: Both political parties and civil society can engage with political authority. Political parties, in particular, work towards achieving power through political activities, primarily participating in elections and engaging in political mobilization to secure the maximum number of votes. Furthermore, political parties often define their interests beyond the general public policy of the country or engage in strikes of a political nature intending to influence and monitor the ruling authority. As stated, "Civil society organizations can form alliances with political parties, but if they become dominated by these parties, they lose their essential function within the political community, thereby losing their capacity for functions such as mediation and the promotion and building of democracy" (Al-Faleh, 2011, pp. 26-27).

Distinction between Civil Society and Unions: Regarding the difference between civil society and unions, a union is defined based on its function as "an institution that brings together a group of individuals to defend their interests. Unions seek labor gains and the defense of their members' interests, encompassing unions of doctors, engineers, pharmacists, lawyers, journalists, education workers, and others."

### Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

The concept of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) refers to "organizations situated between the government and the private sector, independent from the state, organized by a group of individuals, and seeking to influence the state's public policy" (Naji, 2007, p. 173). NGOs also play a significant role within civil society concerning "the freedom of social movement for individuals and groups, the freedom to express their intellectual aspirations, social and political participation, the freedom of initiative, and ways of contributing to the development of society" (et al. [Akhroun], 2012).

At the international and national levels, examples include the International Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in Islamic countries (Khalil, 2008, p. 229). The functions and roles of NGOs vary according to the nature of the political, economic, and social system. The vitality of this role is fundamentally linked to the extent to which democratic principles and rules are entrenched and the availability of a conducive climate for exercising these roles. These functions include providing economic assistance to impoverished sectors, as well as functions related to disseminating a culture of initiative and volunteerism, and engaging with international organizations.

Regarding the distinction between the organizations constituting civil society and those associated with kin-based society, while some suggest the concepts are identical, others, such as Azmi Bishara, reject this. Bishara differentiates between them, considering them indicative of different levels of societal development, without, however, excluding the possibility that communal organizations could be part of "civil society" within the specific context of the current Arab situation.

### Concept of Participatory Democracy

The idea of participatory democracy is based on guaranteeing the right to political practice through party pluralism, the peaceful transfer of power, and respect for rights and freedoms. Civil society is strengthened and consolidated within democratic systems.

### Theoretical Approaches to Civil Society

Social contract theory emerged in Europe in the mid-seventeenth century "to liberate the state from the authority of ecclesiastical religion and to provide a secular foundation open to discussion and critique" (Al-Sadiq, 2004, p. 20) – essentially, the separation of religious authority from political authority, known as secularism. This implies that authority is neither divine, hereditary, nor monarchical; rather, the legitimacy of power rests on the will of the people and civil society.

The concept of civil society solidified within the modern state framework from the beginning of the eighteenth century as an alternative to the concept of the "divine right" to rule, aiming to reduce state hegemony and limit its authority. Karl Marx viewed civil society as an arena for class struggle, while Gramsci considered it a sphere for ideological competition aimed at achieving control and hegemony.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his book *Democracy in America*, pointed to the "infinite multitude of associations and clubs that citizens join spontaneously," linking the guarantee of political freedom to "laws and customs (mores), that is, the moral and intellectual state of the people" (Al-Subaihi, 2000, p. 7).

Thomas Hobbes viewed civil society as a voluntary social contract based on utility among its parties: "Civil political society is the artificial fruit of a voluntary, calculation-based pact founded on utility" (Al-Madani, 1997, p. 53).

For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the state constitutes "a contract wherein the individual relinquishes his freedom to all, according to an indivisible general will; sovereignty resides in the people, and the transformation is from natural man to the civil citizen." Rousseau saw civil society as the antithesis of religious society, equating civil society itself with secular (laïc) society (Al-Subaihi, *Civil Society in the Arab World*, 2000, p. 20).

Thus, the concept of civil society crystallized within Western political thought to achieve democracy, guarantee individual liberties, enhance political participation, and embody the true meaning of citizenship. However, in practice, this can involve supporting the authorities in major elections (presidential elections, referendums), overlooking the use of an association or its resources for campaigning for its members when they run in local or parliamentary elections, or when used to support parties or candidates loyal to the authorities.

### Chronological Historical Context of Civil Society in Algeria

Algerian civil society throughout history has been built upon shared charitable work, which spontaneously evolved to become more dynamic and active, encompassing all religious, political, and intellectual ideologies. It is rooted in voluntary charitable action stemming from individuals' convictions and self-commitment. With democratic transformations, it became more structured and organized. This reflects the importance of civil society as a fundamental pillar and support for the state's actions, through the effective work of its institutions, establishing it as a key partner within participatory democracy.

### Civil Society during the Colonial Era

Despite the French colonial dominance over associations, Algerians established their own organizations, such as the General Union of Algerian Muslim Students (founded in 1955) and the General Union of Algerian Workers (founded in 1956). Scouting, student, and sports associations served as spaces for training and developing nationalist activists. However, the colonial administration quickly reacted against this situation and issued the decree of March 17, 1956, which provided for the dissolution of any such association (Arous, 2002).

The liberation movements during the French colonial era originated from civil society, whose strength lay in civic organizations like the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema, the student union, the Algerian Muslim Scouts, and various political parties, which are also considered part of civil society. These organizations were the main actors spreading liberation consciousness.

### Civil Society after Independence (1962-1988)

The reality of associational work during the post-independence single-party period saw organizations operating within the framework of the single party. Examples include the National Liberation Front's Youth Union or the Scouting movement, which was part of the union structure encompassing youth, students, women, peasants, and other workers. These constituted the national-level civil society and contributed to political, economic, and social development.

In truth, the single-party system and socialist economy were incompatible with the principle of civil, associational, and trade union freedoms. The French Law of 1901 remained nominally in

effect, alongside the single union and single party system, until the Constitution of February 22, 1989. This constitution ushered in the birth of an independent associational movement and permitted party pluralism through a set of political and economic reforms. This marked the starting point and the beginning of the establishment and rise of a genuine civil society and an independent associational movement. Article 39 enshrined freedoms of expression and association; Article 40 reinforced this right by affirming the recognized right to establish associations of a political nature (founding political parties); and Article 53 affirmed the right to unionize for all citizens.

#### The 2020 Constitution and the Renewed Emphasis on Civil Society

The 2020 Constitution focused – for the first time – on the centrality of civil society, starting with the Preamble which involved civil society associations in the management of public affairs. It also included – in a constitutional precedent for Algeria – six articles (10, 16, 53, 60, 205, and 213) concerning the role of civil society, aiming to grant it a strong position, according to the legislator's justifications. The Constitution mandated the creation of the "National Observatory for Civil Society" to promote its role at various levels and in affairs concerning the country and society.

The year 2020 marked an opening for civil society with the establishment of the National Observatory for Civil Society as a forward-looking body operating according to the interests of the Algerian state and its institutions. Civil society thus became a partner to state institutions, including the Observatory, which works to give new impetus to the Law on Associations and promote the role of civil society, rather than restrict it.

Before 2020, civil society was often subject to bureaucracy and arbitrary administrative decisions. Following the amendment of the 2020 Constitution, which introduced unprecedented elements regarding civil society – notably seven articles with an oversight dimension – civil society began to operate within a more defined democratic space. The provision for combating corruption was included among measures to enhance civil society's advisory skills, overseen by the National Observatory for Civil Society, an entity established by the President of the Republic to address the concerns and interests of the diverse components of civil society.

The strength of civil society lies not in numbers but in impact and results measured by the Algerian family or citizen according to public policies. Associations thus become a force of opinion and decision-making, representing citizens while respecting the law and adapting to the state's political, economic, and social reality.



Furthermore, the 2020 Constitution aimed to enhance participatory democracy by cultivating a genuine political will to involve civil society in decision-making and contribute to local development. This has generated a significant surge in civil society activity across various spheres of public life today.

According to the National Observatory for Civil Society, the number of accredited national associations in Algeria is approximately 1,134, covering various fields and activities. These include associations for training and employment, environmental promotion, national youth engagement associations, national associations for health, children, and women, and national associations for friendship, cultural cooperation, heritage, and tourism. They possess significant human resources, particularly youth potential. However, regarding the quality and standard of services, a clear distinction remains between those striving to work effectively and those maintaining only a nominal presence. Consequently, the strength of civil society cannot be judged by the number of its components but by the quality and results achieved.

#### The Digital Sphere as a Domain for Civil Society Activities

The contours of digital civil society began to emerge amidst the accelerating technological and electronic development witnessed globally since the dawn of the third millennium. The digital sphere has successfully created spaces supportive of freedom of expression, providing platforms, opportunities, and tools for demanding rights, expressing opinions, and ensuring freedom of thought. This occurs within the framework of what is known as digital or technological determinism: "The social fabric is culture advancing in step with technology; human societies are culturally constructed by technological materialism and socially built through social evolution, implying a dialectic of the social and the technical" (Rahouma, 2007, p. 83).

The digital sphere is considered a virtual space linked to the internet, offering modern tools such as applications and digital platforms with features that provide users numerous advantages aiding the dissemination and discussion of their diverse ideas and orientations. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital tools have become more than just secondary means or instruments used by civil society to achieve its goals; social mobilization shifted from the physical realm to the digital sphere, making this space the sole avenue for expressing the demands and objectives of social movements.

"Digital culture presents itself as one of the new expressions for strengthening civil society culture, representing a form of organization and a way to practice democracy in the future" (Foran, 2007, p. 21).

"If every era has its revolution, then every revolution has its methods and vocabulary. If the digital and media revolution has lessons, it is that soft power has proven stronger than authoritarian and despotic regimes and their security apparatuses. Thus, we are facing transformations not wrought by machine guns, but by digital books and screens that penetrate iron walls and closed dogmas" (Harb, 2012, p. 30).

Social media platforms in Algeria have significantly contributed to giving civil society a strong impetus in developing its work and intensifying its activity. This has led to major transformations in its practices and management, thanks to its liberation from the bureaucratic, administrative, and legal obstacles that hinder the development of its practices in reality.

Consequently, civil society in Algeria has been able to leverage modern technologies to establish influential and effective media and communication platforms through which it addresses various segments and strata of society, successfully attracting diverse groups of citizens.

The most significant political transformation in Algeria remains the emergence of a virtual civil society with its own philosophy, determinants, and symbols. This is a society that grows and expands daily, expressing itself through a new discourse via social platforms that glorifies and praises civic action, elevates its status, and operates actively at all levels and across vital political, economic, religious, voluntary, and cultural sectors.

"Today, in our Arab societies, as in most countries of the world, power relations between society and the state, and the individual and the state and institutions, are being redistributed under the influence of modern communication media and their open sources" (Al-Jamōūsī, 2016, p. 38).

Digital networking sites today represent an electronic revolution in the field of social communication and constant interaction among members of social structures. They have contributed to building an interactive electronic civil society that offers the fastest ways to communicate and meet the needs of activists and the desires of interacting users. Among the most popular social networks in Algeria are "Facebook and TikTok," where users number in the millions.

Currently, they are even used as tools contributing to political development, social mobilization, and building an active and influential citizenship culture in reality. It should be noted here that the future of information and communication technology positively supports democratic culture and grants greater freedoms.

Traditional social belonging has been replaced by belonging to virtual groups facilitated by social networking sites. These digital spaces allow for the discussion of taboo subjects forbidden in lived reality, which can be considered an escape to a virtual world offering a wider margin of freedom, away from the constraints and censorship of societal authority.

The digital sphere has reflected the profound transformations experienced by Algerian society, with many civil society institutions establishing a virtual presence, whether by creating specific websites found via search engines, active in various human rights, humanitarian, developmental, children's rights, and other fields.

It suffices to present an idea, issue, photos, or videos on the pages of civil society activists for everyone to engage in mobilization and discussion, all in complete independence and far from the restrictions and censorship of the authorities and traditional institutions of social control. They express their solidarity simply by clicking the "Like" or "Share" button, or through comments and other manifestations of solidarity in the virtual world.

Online collective action and advocacy have become a new space for civil society in its digitized electronic form. Individuals anywhere in the world, from their homes, can invite an unlimited number of people to take stances on a specific issue in a short period, organize collective actions, and discuss various social issues freely.

In reality, digital activism existed both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Some individuals find the virtual space of social media an alternative means for protesting numerous international and local issues and human rights violations. Civil society organizations in Algeria, in all their forms, have adopted digital platforms as an alternative workspace for activities that cannot be practiced in reality. This has provided an opportunity for large, unlimited numbers of individuals to participate in various civil society activities. Despite the concerted efforts of civil society to expand its operational space through the digital sphere, this sphere remains constrained by security surveillance, which is sometimes necessary as transgressions impacting state and societal security can occur.

### The Experience of the National Observatory for Civil Society as a Model Digital Platform

The National Observatory for Civil Society represents a "National Forum on Participatory Democracy," serving as a platform and space for consultation, conveying concerns among all associations, exchanging experiences, and fostering coordination and cooperation across the various specializations within which the associational movement operates. The National Observatory for Civil Society also possesses a digital platform named "Kafaat+" for training and developing the capacities of civil society. The "Kafaat+" platform is considered the first digital distance learning platform specifically for civil society, offering free training and educational content to all civil society actors. The launch of the "Kafaat+" platform is part of the implementation of the National Observatory for Civil Society's Strategic Vision 2024-2030, which aims to contribute to fulfilling Commitment No. 08 of the President of the Republic regarding the building and empowerment of a free and responsible civil society.

The "Kafaat+" platform provides a package of 30 training courses covering key topics related to the activities of civil society organizations. These include the legal framework for associations, rules of administrative and financial management, human resource management, project management, social entrepreneurship, volunteering, strategic management skills, foundations of participatory democracy, local development, environment and sustainable development, in addition to the ethics of associational work, the role of civil society organizations in preventing and combating corruption, and the application of digitalization skills in associational work, among other subjects. The platform also offers a package of support services for civil society actors, such as providing pedagogical and legal resources and references relevant to civil society (including 69 legal references), initiating research activities, and conducting applied studies concerning the issues, challenges, and stakes facing civil society.

### Mechanisms for Promoting Civil Society Activities

In its electronic form, digital civil society aims to maintain a balance in the relationship between the state and society, combat corruption, bribery, nepotism, authoritarianism, and bureaucracy. It contributes to socio-political socialization and participates in sustainable development, whether through providing services, assisting in problem-solving, or mediating between local/national authorities and citizens, exemplified by the Republic Mediators project in Algeria where citizen complaints can reach the presidency.

Regarding the means of political struggle for civil society, it is primarily based on dialogue, negotiation, and peaceful pressure on governments and local authorities, establishing networks of local and national organizations, and striving to influence decision-makers by mobilizing public opinion on critical issues, utilizing all available media, whether independent or state-controlled. Here, we specifically refer to the open platforms of social media, which have become indirect means of pressure, suggestion, and negotiation.

Operating within its modern digital conception in the era of globalization and technology requires civil society to embrace professionalism, possess enhanced political negotiation skills, move towards specialization and quality, and activate elites rather than focusing solely on the quantity or number of activists. This is especially crucial given that civil society actors serve as a vital link between citizens and official local and national authorities, conveying citizens' concerns and addressing the social issues they face.

Consequently, members of digital civil society must understand the culture of communication, effective participation, and sophisticated dialogue by promoting digital citizenship and embedding participatory democracy in their virtual activities. Current circumstances may sometimes lack the ideal enabling environment and responsiveness for civil society effectiveness, making it imperative to adapt and keep pace with ongoing political, economic, and social transformations.

Based on this, organizations engage in various training workshops on interacting with administration, communication techniques, and other areas relevant to associational work at the national, provincial, and local levels. Thus, the more professional the work, the more civil society becomes a key actor and an important ally for the Algerian state. Within the framework of training initiatives, organizations have established partnership and twinning agreements, for instance with the European Union, to study future visions and approaches concerning trade and consumer affairs, particularly by delving into the practical details of operational activities. These agreements have allowed for the identification of obstacles and the development of solutions, in an effort to prepare future plans that achieve financial, administrative, and organizational independence, especially concerning the diversification of income sources for organizations. Among the operational mechanisms of electronic civil society are:

- Monitoring Government and Local Authority Policies: It serves as a tool for overseeing government authority and regulating the conduct of individuals and groups

towards each other and towards authority. It involves tracking government works and projects, especially as the government itself moves towards electronic digital governance.

- Participation in Various Fields of Development: Civil society institutions must engage in diverse areas of development, whether by proposing development projects or positioning themselves as advisory bodies in various sectors, including economic, educational, health, or cultural fields.

- Achieving Participatory Democracy: Civil society fosters a climate for electoral participation in the public and political spheres, working to mobilize public opinion and advocate for competent individuals.

- Facilitating Initiative and Participation: Civil society organizations and associations are instruments for individual initiative, expressing free will and positive participation in political and developmental life.

- Socio-Political Socialization: This function reflects civil society's capacity to contribute to increasing political awareness and training members of civic associations to navigate rapid political transformations and changes effectively.

- Protecting Human Rights: Defending the rights of children, people with special needs, vulnerable groups, and those in underserved areas (often termed 'shadow zones').

- Mediation in Conflict Resolution: Mediating between officials and citizens through communication channels, conveying concerns, resolving problems, and removing bureaucratic and administrative obstacles, especially for project holders.

- Providing Services and Volunteer Work: The efforts of civil society institutions should be evident in voluntary charitable initiatives during various occasions, such as holidays, the start of the school year, and other events.

## Conclusion

The authorities in Algeria embrace civil society in its various forms – associations and unions – constitutionally through clear legal frameworks established in successive reforms, and customarily through representatives such as the Sheikhs of Zawiyas and community/tribal notables. This adoption is also evident in political and media discourse. However, the challenge often lies within civil society itself, which is constrained by several factors affecting its efficacy. Perhaps the most significant is the training of its personnel, which positions the social practices of organizations, associations, and various groupings as highly problematic. Despite the existence of the idea [of civil

society] and strong belief in it, a lack of management experience and training, coupled with insufficient legal knowledge, often results in civil society activities lacking professionalism.

Conversely, digital civil society, as a form of soft power, possesses the potential to address problems that neither political parties nor even traditional civil society (in its classic sense) can effectively tackle. This is because the speed of access to and interaction with electronic information instantly reaches mobile phone users everywhere – in cars, homes, and workplaces – unbound by time, location, or immediate censorship. This allows for social and economic change to occur through peaceful means, removed from political conflicts and the state's tendency towards authoritarianism, control, and monopolization of all aspects of political life.

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