The notion that civil society is a key base from which to propel a transition to democracy is a dominant theme in both the literature on political reform and in the democracy-promotion programs found throughout the region. This notion is underwritten by the hope that civil society organizations (CSOs), such as advocacy groups and service-oriented groups, will empower citizens to engage with, and extract concessions from, the state in a pluralist political environment. After Yemeni unification, many CSOs did emerge quickly to fill the political space that was deliberately vacated by the regime, but they were not sufficiently equipped to protect that space or fight for more once the regime began to retract it. The inability of Yemeni civil society and oppositionists to successfully counteract the regime has meant that they have not (yet) emerged as significant drivers of political reform.

There are three key barriers to civil society groups forming an effective counterbalance to the regime in Yemen. The first is that civil society has tended to mirror the system of patronage that drives the ruling elite—the effectiveness of actors in the civil sphere is often derived largely from their proximity to the leadership. Without personal connections to regime figures, political activists, advocacy groups, newspapers, and professional syndicates are unlikely to stay solvent or have their interests heard. Second, the way that the concept of civil society has been applied to the Middle East by Western scholars and democracy promoters often presupposes an American lobby-group style of politics where organized groups are empowered to bargain with the state to achieve specific goals. This assumes the rule of law and respect for the sovereignty of the state by those bargaining with it, neither of which have been consistently apparent in Yemen. The law, or more
often the lack of its enforcement, does not consistently protect civil groups, which makes it extremely difficult for activists to press beyond the regime’s red lines without risk of punishment. If civil society is to counteract the state, it must be clear where and what the state is, but Yemen’s tangled web of patron-client links makes this identification difficult. Finally, and most importantly, gains by civil society in Yemen, such as the growing number of organizations and the slightly more liberal regulatory laws, have not corresponded to losses in the regime’s power. In a pluralized authoritarian state, the presence of an active though stifled civil society can actually help protect the state’s key political elites.

Civil society is a contested space in which nonstate actors compete for influence in the decision-making process—funding, status, the defense of their members’ interests, and control over public discourse. It can include nongovernmental organizations, political parties, advocacy groups, professional or trade unions, religious organizations, clubs, and nonstate media. As the Yemeni experience clearly highlights, even groups that do attempt to affect government decision making do not necessarily politically empower their members or counter the state. They are often mired in their own corruption, governmental interference, inexperience, incompetence, and resource seeking. The sphere of nonstate activism can be, but is not necessarily, counterhegemonic.

Far from unambiguously acting as “instruments for the expression of interests … against the regime” as they are often portrayed in the literature, some Yemeni CSOs and opposition groups have actually functioned, intentionally or otherwise, in support of existing power structures. This chapter builds on the idea that while civil society may have provided the impetus for democratic transitions in the West, it may not necessarily perform the same function elsewhere, particularly where large amounts of rentier income reinforce the state’s co-optive and coercive power.

In pluralized authoritarian states, opposition groups can unintentionally strengthen the regime they seek to weaken. The managed and curtailed political space that regimes grant opposition groups can mean that the opposition’s actions either serve to legitimize the regime, providing them with access to funding from donors advocating democracy, or act as a pressure valve for popular discontent. Formal, and therefore identifiable, opposition groups provide avenues for dissent that are more manageable for the regime than if discontent were simply left to bubble below the surface unchecked. Regimes in pluralized authoritarian states thus maintain their positions in part through the type of openings that might normally be expected to dislodge them. Like a co-opted parliament, legal though stifled opposition groups can help gauge the level of likely threats to the regime, and by incorporating dissenters into the legal political arena, radicals are also probably less likely to unify