Dialogue with State Security Actors in Hybrid Regimes: Recommendations for Constructive Engagement

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Abstract

This paper analyses engagements and negotiations between civic and state security actors in hybrid regimes, as well as the context surrounding engagements and the hybrid regimes themselves. It analyses ten country case studies and draws on 35 interviews with actors directly involved in, or with direct knowledge of, specific outreach and dialogue attempts. Its primary goal is to provide recommendations to civic actors seeking to engage with state security actors. The recommendations concentrate, among other things, on the importance of establishing achievable objectives and anticipating backlash; conducting thorough research, mapping key actors, and having detailed plans; unifying different actors to exert pressure during key moments; cultivating trust through ongoing dialogue and drawing upon personal relationships; maintaining open communication channels even before formal negotiations begin; using personalised gestures to reduce tensions and the risk of violence; leveraging the role of neutral parties; focusing outreach efforts on state security actors with vertical and horizontal reach; drawing on the influence and experience of former security personnel; employing traditional and social media to convey demands and signal intentions; pragmatically including diverse stakeholders to strengthen legitimacy; using informal approaches as a fallback option; and balancing secrecy for sensitive issues with transparency for legitimacy.

I. Introduction and Overview

Democratic transitions, both successful and unsuccessful, are widely studied. However, there remains a significant grey zone in understanding and analysing state security actors who often play an outsized role in government, politics, and society.

In a few cases, the role is clearly visible, such as when state security actors rule directly. In other cases, the role is less evident, occurring beneath the surface. The picture is especially murky in so-called hybrid regimes, where state security actors of a country co-opt, or find themselves co-opted by and co-dependent upon, a ruling party.

In hybrid contexts, civic and democratic actors interested in constructive dialogue or peaceful change often struggle to understand the nature and dynamics of the relationship between state security actors and the ruling party; the loyalty mechanisms and layers of control and monitoring between the two; and the factors that could bring co-optation to an end. In many cases, civic actors are also unaware of which strategies are most likely to increase the possibility and quality of dialogue and outreach with state security actors.

While there may be individuals within state security institutions who are keen to engage, mistrust of civic and opposition leaders is common. Further, any informal or unauthorised engagements may lead to harsh punishment and the possibility of legal action under security sector legislation, for both state security or civic actors attempting to engage.

Such challenges significantly complicate possibilities of constructive engagement and dialogue between civic actors and relevant state security figures, limiting the options for confidence building and political settlement that could usher in a political opening or democratic transition.

In scores of countries, including several where IFIT works, such as Venezuela, Sudan and Zimbabwe, state security actors play an oversized role in government, politics, and society. In Africa alone there have been 13 coups or attempted coups since 2021.[1] In the case of the cross-regional countries examined in this research, several have suffered military coups[2], with two – Myanmar and Sudan – having subsequently descended into full-scale civil war.

Yet, hybrid regimes are not doomed to collapse into authoritarianism or war. In 2021, IFIT published an initial discussion paper, The Scope for Dialogue with Security Forces in Hybrid Regimes, which explored how the role of state security actors in hybrid regimes can be better understood, and how constructive engagement between civic and state security actors can be encouraged and realised. Following the publication of that paper,

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1. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Africa's Crisis of Coups".
2. Thailand in 2014; Mali in 2012, 2020 and 2021; Myanmar in 2021; Sudan in 2021; and Burkina Faso twice in 2022.

IFIT embarked on a longer, multi-year research study, focusing on first-hand interviews with direct participants in dialogue initiatives in hybrid regimes. This policy paper is a direct result of that research, offering analysis and recommendations for how to encourage, facilitate and improve dialogue efforts in such contexts.

The paper predominantly is meant to assist civic and democratic actors operating in hybrid regime contexts, seeking to help them achieve more realistic and successful engagements with state security actors. In total, IFIT interviewed 35 individuals across 10 different country case studies: Burkina Faso, Egypt, Georgia, Mali, Mexico, Myanmar, Pakistan, Peru, Sudan, and Thailand. The interviewees included retired and serving state security actors; legislators and politicians; and a mix of lawyers, judges, activists and diplomats. Where authorised, IFIT has used the interviewees' own words to describe the events that took place.

For civic actors operating in hybrid regime contexts, it can be uncomfortable to engage with state security actors who may be implicated in criminal activity or human rights violations. However, the alternative to engagement and dialogue is often a vicious status quo. In addition, because state security actors frequently have the de facto capacity to veto or endorse political openings and democratic transitions, there is much to be gained in trust-building and engagement.

Several of the individuals interviewed for this paper expressed regret at not being more open to the idea of engaging and negotiating with state security actors when the moment arose. When asked to reflect on previous engagements and what they would have done differently, one interviewee commented "I would pay more attention to those who were actually in power … I spent most of my time and energy appealing to the masses, but the masses alone were not enough."[3] This quote is reflective of a common sentiment expressed in many interviews.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first outlines the project methodology, including the different phases of the project, definitions of key terms, case selection criteria, and research limitations. The second outlines the main findings. The third provides recommendations drawing on these findings. The fourth concludes and outlines possible avenues for further research.

3. Interview with Thai Activist.

II. Methodology

The development of this paper consisted of three main phases:

1) Literature review and case selection, followed by the production of research reports on each country case study.

2) Interviews with key individuals who were directly involved in, or had direct knowledge of, transition-seeking engagements or negotiations between civic and state security actors.

3) Production of a draft paper that received feedback through expert focus groups, peer reviews and fact-checking processes.

The paper relies heavily on the unique insights provided by the interviewees, which may otherwise not have come to light. This is one of the main added values of this research.

Definitions

Working definitions were used and refined throughout the research. The definitions were used in a flexible way to interpret ambiguous data uncovered in the case studies.

1) **Hybrid regimes**: These are defined as governments that combine democratic and authoritarian traits, able to pivot quickly from democratic to semi-democratic or authoritarian practices (see Figure 1). A key characteristic of hybrid regimes is that state security actors find themselves co-opted by and co-dependent upon a ruling party, or vice-versa, through a combination of different strategies that may include coercion, surveillance, and financial and political incentives.[4] Our definition of hybrid regimes excludes military juntas and totalitarian states that do not purport to possess democratic features.

2) **Civic and democratic actors**: These are defined to encompass a variety of actors, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs); think tanks; community groups; religious, traditional and academic institutions; business leaders; trade unions; media; student movements; and political opposition parties with a democratic orientation. Our definition excludes those who are members of an armed group and/or the ruling or governing party.

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4. Hybrid regimes are also known as electoral autocracies, illiberal democracies, electoral authoritarian regimes, and semi-democratic regimes. This research prefers the term "hybrid regimes", because it refers to the crucial relationship between state security forces and the ruling party, which makes up the "regime", while also reflecting the range of tactics employed by the regime to stay in power, which can fluctuate between semi-democratic and authoritarian.

3) **State security actors**: These are defined as official institutions and individuals with public security mandates (e.g., police, armed forces, intelligence services, executive protection forces, and interior and defence ministries). The range of state security actors varies by context (e.g., the army may be more prominent in one state, the intelligence forces in another, etc.). Our definition excludes democratic oversight and accountability institutions.

4) **Transition-seeking dialogue or engagement**: This term is used to describe any perceived good-faith negotiation, dialogue, or engagement effort between civic and state security actors in which the principal aim is some form of peaceful democratic transition or political opening in which state security actors shift to a more apolitical role.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, hybrid regimes can quickly transform from a seemingly democratic phase with controlled elections and some political openness, to a phase marked by open restriction and repression – and then back again. This "plasticity" allows hybrid regimes to pivot away from or toward coercion as and when needed to retain power.

Figure 1: Plasticity of Hybrid Regimes[5]

More authoritarian
Regime continuity depends mainly on repression by security forces

More democratic
Regime continuity can be achieved mainly through elections

Semi-Authoritarian
A mix of authoritarian tactics and democratic practices
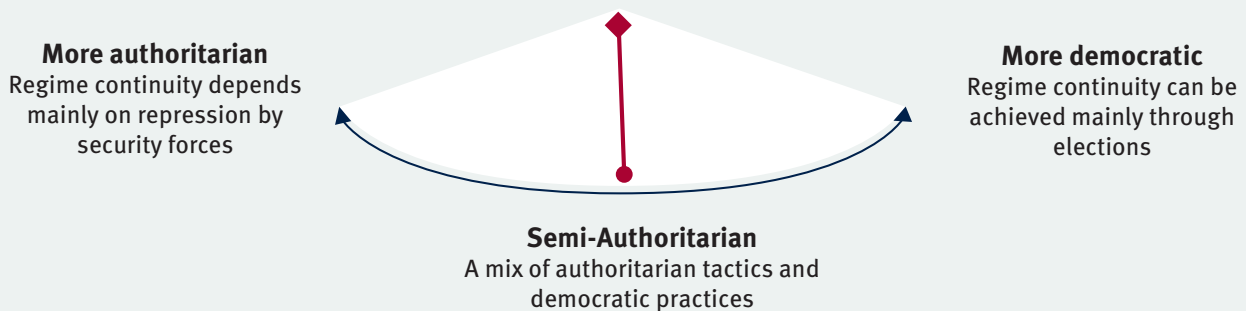
Case Selection

The research was limited to:

1) Cases with clear evidence or strong indications that civic actors were involved in transition-seeking dialogue or engagement with state security actors that did result, or could have resulted, in explicit agreements;

2) Countries that fell under IFIT's working definition of hybrid regimes during most or all of the period examined; and

3) Cases where those who were involved in the dialogue effort are still alive.

5. Andrés García Trujillo, Alejandro Urrutia and Michael Penfold, *The Scope for Dialogue with Security Forces in Hybrid Regimes*, (IFIT, 2021).

Following these criteria, extensive desk research and consultations with IFIT's global community of 330+ experts, as well as experts outside the network, were undertaken to identify suitable case studies. In the initial consultation process, IFIT identified 100+ experts and contacts that could contribute to the research. From this list, the project team reached out to 70+ experts and engaged in meetings and interviews with 50 of them. IFIT conducted 23 interviews with existing members of the IFIT network and 27 with non-IFIT members (who were recommended by IFIT experts).

From the initial consultation process, a total of 29 cases were examined, of which 10 (see Table 1) were included in the research. The majority of excluded cases were deemed unfit when measured against the above criteria, principally because they were not hybrid regimes or because there was insufficient evidence of civic-state security actor engagements.

Having identified the cases, IFIT then established contact with potential interviewees through local partners and their networks. In total, IFIT conducted 35 in-depth interviews, including seven with state security actors and 28 with civic actors, in most cases prominent figures of their countries and historical period. To protect the interviewees, some of whom required strict confidentiality, all are reported here without names or information that could identify them.

Table 1: Case Studies

Case	Period	Description	Outcomes and Aftermath
Burkina Faso Uprising	2014–2015	President Blaise Compaoré attempted to lift constitutional term limits, prompting widespread protest against his rule in October 2014. Security forces were deployed, but the protesters refused to give in. Ultimately, the military forced Compaoré to step down. Negotiations between the opposition and the military continued with mediation from the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).	• Transitional Agreement reached (November 2014). • Elections held (November 2015). • Military coups d'état (January and September 2022).
The Egyptian Revolution	2011–2012	After mass protests swept Egypt and the region in January 2011, the Egyptian military removed President Hosni Mubarak in mid-February. Arab Spring protesters participated in backdoor negotiations with the military, whilst the military had initially pushed Mubarak to negotiate.	• Transitional Government under Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (February 2011–June 2012). • Parliamentary Elections (2011–2012) and Presidential Election (May–June 2012). • New Constitution (December 2012). • Military coup d'état (July 2013).
Georgia's "Rose Revolution"	2003–2004	Contested elections in November 2003 led to mass protests headed by opposition figure Mikheil Saakashvili. Later that same month, parliament was stormed and the government led by President Eduard Shevardnadze collapsed without any resistance from the security forces, who had been engaged in dialogue with opposition leaders.	• Presidential (January 2004) and Parliamentary (March 2004) elections. • Constitutional amendments (February 2004).
The Malian Transition	1991–1992	Student protests against inequality, economic stagnation, and repression, supported by civil society and political groups, turned into riots and led to the fall of President Moussa Traoré in a March 1991 coup d'état.	• Transitional Committee formed with 10 military and 15 civilian members. • National Conference held (July–August 1991). • New Constitution approved by referendum (January 1992). • Parliamentary (February–March 1992) and Presidential (April 1992) elections.
Mexico's Democratic Transition	1990–2000	Democratic elections in the year 2000 led to the downfall of the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) 70-year rule. This was possibly due to a political liberalisation process that began in the late 1980s. During this period, members of the main political opposition – the National Action Party (PAN) – are said to have held multiple dialogues with Mexico's armed forces about the future of the country.	• General elections (July 2000).

Case	Period	Description	Outcomes and Aftermath
Myanmar's Attempted Transition	2010–2015	After Aung San Suu Kyi's release from prison in 2010, she and other civic actors held high-level discussions with President Thein Sein and high-ranking military leaders (including General Min Aung Hlaing).	• Elections held (November 2015 and November 2020). • Military coup d'état (February 2021).
Pakistan's "Lawyers' Movement for the Restoration of Judiciary"	2007–2009	In 2007, Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry was removed by President Pervez Musharraf. Lawyers and activists protested en masse, and negotiations with the military saw Chaudhry's reinstatement, although he was later suspended again. Protests developed into a country-wide People's Movement, continuing until 2009.	• Chaudhry reinstated for the first time (July 2007). • Musharraf resigns as head of the armed forces (November 2007). • Elections held (February 2008). • Musharraf resigns as President (August 2008). • Chaudhry reinstated for the second time (March 2009).
The Peruvian Transition	2000–2006	In June 2000, the Organisation of American States (OAS) mediated talks between President Alberto Fujimori and opposition and civil society groups following contested elections.	• Fujimori resigns following a bribery scandal (November 2000). • Transitional Government formed (November 2000). • Presidential elections (April-June 2001).
The Sudanese Revolution	2019–2021	Mass protests over inflation, particularly the price of bread and fuel, beginning in December 2018 led the military to remove President Omar Al-Bashir and take power in a coup d'état in April 2019. Negotiations between opposition groups and the transitional military council were mediated by the African Union.	• Power-sharing agreement under the Constitutional Declaration (August 2019). • Second coup (October 2021). • Civil war breaks out (April 2023).
The Thai Protests	2020–2022	Following the dissolution of the opposition Future Forward Party in February 2020 by the constitutional court, protests broke out against the military-backed regime. The military proposed a "reconciliation committee" to address protesters' grievances, with negotiations taking place behind the scenes.	• Substantive dialogue broke down in the autumn of 2020.

III. Findings

While the cases under examination display a myriad of context-specific differences, this research revealed several recurring areas of focus, along with some case-specific insights. The findings are not exhaustive but provide useful evidence of some of the most common themes across the cases. These can be broadly categorised into three areas:

1) **Context**: This refers to the events prior to or during the transition-seeking engagement or negotiations, and how these influenced or catalysed the process.

2) **Nature of the regime**: This refers to how the regime functioned, its position on the authoritarian-democratic continuum, and the loyalty mechanisms employed.

3) **Negotiations:** This is a broad category encompassing negotiation formats, participants and agendas.

Context

In nearly every case, engagements and dialogues were provoked or triggered by an internal or external shock (an event which upsets the status quo and opens the door to a change in how the country is governed). These functioned as short-term triggers for engagement or transition and partly overlap with "ripeness" theory even if they did not culminate in a mutually hurting stalemate or mutually perceived way out.

Most such shocks are difficult to predict; but for civic actors, identifying the opportunity in these moments is crucial, as they tend to evaporate quickly.

Political Shocks

The most common shock observed was political in nature and includes, most prominently, political decisions deemed corrupt or unconstitutional or electoral processes believed to have been manipulated.

In Georgia, the 2003 election was widely acknowledged to be rigged. In Burkina Faso, attempts were made in 2014 to force a constitutional amendment which would allow President Compaoré to run again. Both cases triggered massive street protests, forcing the presidents to resign, ultimately leading to the collapse of their respective regimes. In Georgia, President Shevardnadze resigned as negotiations between civic and state security actors were ongoing, while in Burkina Faso, President Compaoré's resignation precipitated negotiations with state security actors.

In Peru, the shock involved a series of videos (known as the "Vladivideos") incriminating the head of the intelligence service, Vladimiro Montesinos, for bribing powerful individuals. This, combined with widespread discontent over Alberto Fujimori's decision to run

for a third term as president, led to public outcry and the end of Fujimori's government in 2000.[6]

In Thailand, the constitutional court's decision to disband the opposition Future Forward Party in February 2020 directly triggered the first wave of protests against the regime. In Pakistan, President Musharraf's decision in 2007 to summarily dismiss the Chief Justice led to street demonstrations that evolved into the Lawyers' Movement for the Restoration of the Judiciary, ultimately resulting in his resignation.

Natural Shocks

Shocks can also stem from natural disasters. In Myanmar, interviewees highlighted the devastating impact of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and the junta's failed response to the ensuing humanitarian crisis, which became a catalyst for the already-underway transitional process.[7] The initially poor response of the junta forced it to open up to humanitarian support, engage more with international actors like the United Nations (UN), and ultimately enter into transition talks.[8]

Similarly, the 1985 Mexican earthquake is widely recognised as having played an influential role in the country's political transition. The earthquake exposed the government's corruption and weaknesses, as evidenced by its slow and inadequate response to the disaster. Widespread discontent fuelled civic mobilisation and dissatisfaction, which later contributed to broader demands for political change, including the eventual downfall of the PRI-led regime after 70 years in power.

Inspirational Shocks

Most shocks identified in the case set were internal, but interviewees in Mali, for example, highlighted the significance of French President Mitterrand's 1990 "La Baule" speech, an address which encouraged democratisation in Africa and played a key role in influencing the Malian transition less than a year later.[9]

In Thailand, one activist and politician pointed to the importance of the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, alongside parallel pro-democracy movements in Myanmar and Taiwan. Sometimes referred to as the "Milk Tea Alliance", these movements were influential across Southeast Asia and inspired civil society groups to take to the streets and demand change.[10] Similarly, the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia, was a catalyst for the protests against Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and eventually led to engagement and negotiation.

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6. Interview with Peruvian Minister.
7. Interview with former Ambassador to Myanmar.
8. Interview with former UN Advisor on Myanmar.
9. Interview with former Malian Ambassador.
10. Interview with Thai activist and politician.

Cumulative Shocks

Peaks in long-term engagement by foreign governments and international or regional bodies can influence a country's direction and push it towards an opening. For example, in the early 2000s, Georgia began reforming its armed forces to align with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) standards. At the time, Georgia received extensive external assistance from the US, which bolstered already-existing pro-Western sentiment, a key factor in the Rose Revolution.[11] In Myanmar, the regime was denied full ASEAN membership due to its anti-democratic nature. This pressure exerted by ASEAN and its member states was crucial in pushing the regime towards change. Similarly, in Burkina Faso in 2014, ECOWAS and the African Union exerted pressure on state security actors who seized power after the president's resignation, leading to the establishment of a transitional government and elections, with both organisations playing a significant role in supporting the process.[12]

Nature of the Regime

As noted earlier, hybrid regimes are highly flexible and adaptable, shifting between authoritarian and democratic practices while relying on various parts of the security sector to maintain power. The brief analysis below aims to illustrate the range of regime characteristics within the hybrid category, acknowledging that no two hybrid regimes are completely alike.

The Democratic Side

The Georgian government of the late 1990s and early 2000s was relatively democratic. Although the 2003 elections that triggered the Rose Revolution prompted widespread allegations of electoral fraud, and Georgia suffered from extreme levels of corruption, opposition parties were allowed to operate relatively openly. In this environment, professionalised security forces refused to use force against protesters, deciding it was not "morally correct" to resort to violence.[13]

The Peruvian regime under Alberto Fujimori is more difficult to categorise. On the one hand, it displayed many authoritarian traits, including extensive human rights abuses, highly oppressive counter-insurgency operations, and widespread corruption. On the other hand, Fujimori was fairly elected in 1990 and competed in subsequent electoral cycles in 1995 and 2000 (the first relatively fair, the second largely denounced as illegitimate). One interviewee described the regime as a "civil-military regime", highlighting its hybrid nature.[14]

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11. Interview with former Georgian Colonel.
12. Interview with Burkinabé Politician and Activist.
13. Interview with former Georgian Colonel.
14. Interview with former Peruvian Minister.

The Authoritarian Side

Myanmar and Sudan offer a different perspective. They transitioned from fully authoritarian regimes into hybrid regimes once the negotiation and engagement process had already begun. Myanmar had been a military regime with high levels of repression for many years, but in the 2000s, it embarked on what was known as the "roadmap to democracy". This seven-step process gradually introduced flexibility into the political system, leading to the first elections in 20 years in 2010, though without the participation of the main opposition party, the NLD. Five years later, when opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD won the general election, the military still maintained significant control behind the scenes. The 2008 constitution granted the military a quarter of the seats in the legislature, giving them veto power over any constitutional changes.

Sudan too was governed by an authoritarian regime before the fall of President al-Bashir. Even when he was removed by an army-led coup in April 2019, the body which took over, the Transitional Military Council, continued to repress civic actors, killing protesters at several demonstrations, and delayed the release of political prisoners. A lengthy process was required to reach an uneasy agreement between civic and state security actors. Despite mediation by the African Union and Ethiopia, the military was reluctant to give up true power, wanting to remain "influential and in control". In October 2021, the armed forces carried out a second coup, bringing the transitional period to an end.[15]

Civilian Veneers

By definition, all hybrid regimes attempt to project a civilian veneer; they are different in nature from open dictatorships or military juntas. However, different hybrid regimes push their civilian credentials to greater and lesser degrees. In Pakistan, for example, the involvement of security forces in politics is widely acknowledged, though typically taking place behind the scenes. This was especially evident during the latter part of Pervez Musharraf's presidency, in the emergence of the Lawyers' Movement for the Restoration of the Judiciary. One interviewee highlighted the importance of the regime of the time maintaining a "façade" of civilian rule, even though Pakistan was described as "100% under military rule".[16]

> **Box 1: Regime Resilience in Mexico**
>
> Mexico's political transition occurred gradually over more than a decade without a singular, pivotal "transitional moment". While the democratisation process led to notable successes – such as the end of one-party rule, the creation of independent electoral institutions, the strengthening of political pluralism, greater press freedom, and the decentralisation of power – it fell short in critical areas, particularly in achieving comprehensive security sector reform (e.g., the role of the Secretary of National Defence remains occupied by a serving general rather than a civilian politician). More recently, the military has increasing involvement in politics and the economy, and today Mexico's armed forces are responsible for an array of

15. Interview with Sudanese Politician.
16. Interview with Pakistani Activist.

duties atypical for military institutions, including infrastructure development and management, control of customs and ports, law enforcement, banking, and vaccine distribution and public health management, among others. As such, there are parallels between the hybrid regime of the 1980s and 1990s, as key elements of the old regime have not only survived but gradually resurfaced in governance structures over the last two decades.

Military Dominance

In most of the examined cases, the state security institution most involved in the regime was the military or armed forces, rather than the police, intelligence services, or other security forces. Within the military, the army, rather than the navy or air force, typically dominated. However, there were notable exceptions. In Peru, for example, multiple intelligence services played a key role in the regime. The Army, Navy, Air Force, Police, and the Joint Command of the Armed Forces all had their own intelligence services, which fed into the National Intelligence Service, where regime power was concentrated.[17]

In Pakistan, military dominance is visible, although the role of the intelligence services is murky. In the examined period, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in particular were crucial to the regime's operation. In Georgia, meanwhile, the police were prominent during negotiations, ultimately refusing to use violence and siding with protesters. In Burkina Faso, the Regiment of Presidential Security (RPS) played a central role in the process. This unit, whilst formally part of the regular army, was in practice separate, reporting directly to the president and bypassing the usual military hierarchy. One interviewee noted that it was impossible to "influence" the transition while the RPS remained "powerful and present".[18] In Sudan, though the military was dominant in the examined period, the regime also relied on the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a former paramilitary group which was integrated into security force structures in 2017, to bolster its position. This decision ultimately led to a power struggle between the military and the RSF, resulting in the outbreak of war in 2023.

Variations Within the Security Sector

In many of the examined cases, different branches of the security forces held divergent views or supported different sides during engagements and negotiations, sometimes having different benefactors within the regime. Such internal fissures and fragmentation are relevant to civic actors seeking to open up dialogue channels.

For example, in Thailand, one interviewee reported that the police were more open to engaging with and listening to protesters, while the military was focused on suppressing and arresting activists.[19] In Sudan, these divisions became so pronounced that, according to one interviewee, "young officers fought alongside us and tried to protect civilians"

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17. Interview with Peruvian Minister.
18. Interview with member of the Burkinabé Military.
19. Interview with Thai Activist.

when protests turned violent.[20] Similarly, in Georgia, some army units saw soldiers defect to the side of the protesters.[21]

A frequent cause of these divisions is that lower-ranking state security actors are often poorly paid, leaving them with fewer incentives to remain loyal to the regime and making defection more likely. This was evident in Georgia, where law enforcement personnel were "without salaries and wages" in the two years leading up to the Rose Revolution.[22] In Mali, one interviewee mentioned that the military endured low salaries and inadequate equipment and clothing.[23] In some cases, these poor conditions were directly linked to mismanagement or greed by senior state security actors. For instance, in Peru, there were complaints about resources being "siphoned off through corruption by the high command".[24]

Economic Interests of State Security Actors

Many state security actors have economic or business interests embedded within the structure of the regime. In its simplest form, this can involve state security actors receiving bribes. This was the case in Peru, where bribery was said to be "integral to all aspects of Fujimori's regime".[25]

In Egypt and Sudan, the military played prominent roles in their respective countries' economies, abusing their positions for personal gain and for political influence. A particularly notable example is Hemedti, the leader of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), who leveraged his military position to take control of the country's gold production, becoming one of Sudan's wealthiest men in the process.

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20. Interview with Sudanese Politician and Activist.
21. Interview with Georgian Politician.
22. Ibid.
23. Interview with former Malian Colonel.
24. Interview with former Peruvian Minister.
25. Interview with former Peruvian Minister.

Table 2: Diversity of Actors

Case Study	Key State Security Sector Actors	Key Civic Actors
Burkina Faso	• Burkinabé Armed Forces • Regiment of Presidential Security	• Anti-Referendum Collective • Citizen Resistance Front • Coalition Against High Costs
Egypt	• Egyptian Armed Forces (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) • Egyptian National Police • General Intelligence Service	• Student and street protesters (various groups, including 6th April Youth Group) • Muslim Brotherhood • Council of Wise Men
Georgia	• Defence Forces of Georgia • Internal Troops of Georgia • Georgian Police	• United National Movement • Kmara!
Mali	• Malian Armed Forces	• Alliance for Democracy in Mali • Association of Students and Pupils of Mali
Mexico	• Mexican Armed Forces • Mexican Federal Police	• National Action Party • Grupo San Ángel
Myanmar	• Sit-Tat (Myanmar Armed Forces)	• National League for Democracy
Pakistan	• Pakistan Armed Forces • Inter Services Intelligence • Pakistani Police	• Pakistani Lawyers and Judges • Supreme Court Bar Association • Pakistan People's Party
Peru	• Multiple Intelligence Services under the command of the National Intelligence Service • Peruvian Armed Forces • National Police of Peru	• Peru Possible • Independent Moralising Front
Sudan	• Sudanese Armed Forces • Rapid Support Forces	• Forces for Freedom and Change • Sudanese Professionals Association
Thailand	• Royal Thai Police • Royal Thai Armed Forces	• Student Protesters (e.g., United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration) • Future Forward/Move Forward Party • Thai Lawyers for Human Rights

Negotiations

The negotiation processes observed in the examined cases naturally vary substantially, yet common themes and patterns are apparent, particularly concerning the dynamics of power, the role of security actors, and the use of incentives. Negotiations varied between formal and informal, and revealed a mixture of public and secret formats.

Exploratory and Side Engagements

In most cases, exploratory engagements took place either before the main negotiations began or concurrently as they unfolded. For instance, in Burkina Faso in 2014, negotiations were conducted in phases. The military first met separately with the main opposition party, then with the parties that were part of the regime, and finally with traditional and religious leaders. This approach allowed military leaders to understand the needs and demands of each group before bringing all parties together for broader negotiations.[26]

In Mali in 1991, the military, along with the coup leader Amadou Toumani Touré, held meetings with the largest union federation in the country, the National Workers' Union of Mali, before deciding to remove the incumbent president.[27]

Preliminary engagements of this sort are often secret or informal, making it difficult to gather reliable information about them. However, when they do occur, they can be crucial in laying the groundwork for successful negotiations.

"Red Lines"

Understanding "red lines" or non-negotiable issues is a crucial foundation for any engagement. In many of the examined cases, the existence of red lines was a foreseeable impediment to negotiations. In Thailand, reforms to the monarchy were off the table. One interviewee recalled being told, "merely by bringing the monarchy into the discussion, you are declaring a total war."[28] In Sudan, an interviewee noted that "the Military Council at that time had red lines on interference in the operation of the military establishment," meaning any attempts to introduce substantial military reforms were essentially blocked.[29]

In some countries, flexibility was observed with the supposed non-negotiables. In Georgia, for example, while President Shevardnadze eventually resigned, interviewees suggested that if he had backtracked and acknowledged the opposition's victory in parliamentary elections, his resignation as president might not have been necessary to end the protests.[30] When he refused, the opposition hardened its stance and his resignation became a clear red line. A similar scenario occurred in Mali, where an interviewee suggested that the president's removal may have only been a red line if he refused the introduction of genuine multi-party politics.[31]

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26. Interview with retired Burkinabé Colonel.
27. Interview with former Malian Ambassador.
28. Interview with Thai activist.
29. Interview with Sudanese Activist.
30. Interview with Georgian Politician.
31. Interview with Malian Activist.

Regime Preservation Tactics

Although less common, some regimes seeking to survive may enter negotiations as a tactic to buy time, regroup, or create the illusion of change, without any serious intention of accords or reform. These "negotiations" serve as a means of preserving the hybrid regime.

In Thailand, a reconciliation committee was established, ostensibly to address the protesters' concerns and lead to reforms. However, most senators on the committee had been appointed by the regime rather than elected, making the process appear to be an attempt to save face than genuine negotiation.[32] Civic actors eventually boycotted the committee due to its perceived bias.

The situation in Sudan was similar, with interviewees expressing deep scepticism about whether state security actors ever intended a real transition. One commented that the military was primarily interested in "securing its interests and position in the transitional period", rather than facilitating a democratic transition.[33]

Box 2: Negotiation as a Self-Preservation Tactic in Myanmar

The transitional process in Myanmar is regarded as having been conducted in bad faith by state security actors, specifically the Sit-Tat (the Myanmar Armed Forces). Whilst negotiations leading to a transition did take place, and Aung San Suu Kyi and the pro-democracy movement won the 2015 and 2020 elections, interviewees believed that the Sit-Tat never planned to relinquish power. The regime had been subject to sanctions, was partially suspended from ASEAN, and the economy was suffering. A degree of liberalisation and engagement with civic actors was seen as necessary to regain acceptance within the international community. However, commenting on the opposition NLD and their engagement with the Sit-Tat, one interviewee noted "they were completely duped and so was the whole of the Western world and the rest of the international community."[34] Another interviewee described the transition process as simply being a "civilian front to military rule."[35] As noted earlier, the Sit-Tat retained control over any changes to the constitution via their mandated 25% share of the seats in parliament. This had been put in place in 2008, long before the transition and negotiations got underway in earnest. This failsafe ultimately was abandoned as the Sit-Tat took power coercively in a 2021 coup, bringing the transition to an end.

Civic Fragmentation vs Cohesion

In many of the examined cases, state security actors were not alone in their fissures. Civic actors frequently struggled to unify as well, mired in factional infighting rather than the engagements, weakening their position. These divisions were visible in several cases. In Egypt, one interviewee spoke of "backstabbing and betrayals" between the different factions of civic actors, as each sought to reach independent agreements with the armed

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32. Interview with Thai activist.
33. Interview with Sudanese Politician.
34. Interview with former Ambassador to Myanmar.
35. Interview with former Ambassador to Myanmar.

forces, lacking a set of unified goals.[36] In Thailand, protesters clashed over whether to take a more aggressive, direct approach to reforming the monarchy, or adopting a more moderate, conciliatory position.[37] In Burkina Faso, there was initially division between civic actors over the idea of the army seizing power when President Compoaré resigned, with the pro-coup faction winning out. These divisions, often between moderate and hardline factions, arose due to disagreements about the direction of and strategy for engagements. In some cases, debate even existed over whether engagement was worth it at all.[38]

However, in several cases civic actors were able to come together and engage in coalition building. In such instances, the cause which united civic actors, the prospect of change, was seen to surmount the differences. This was reported, for example, in Peru, Pakistan, and Mali. This issue is of great importance for a strong negotiation position and is explored further in the recommendations.

Protracted Talks

Another issue that emerged was that of protracted talks. Several of the examined cases showed that the longer the negotiation takes, the more likely it is that unity among civic actors will break down.

For example, in Sudan, interviewees noted that the military deliberately prolonged negotiations "to weaken the civilian forces."[39] As the process dragged on, disagreements increased, eventually leading the Sudanese Communist Party to withdraw from the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), the main opposition platform. [40]

In Egypt, negotiations continued for several months after President Mubarak's resignation. One interviewee reported that, as consensus between opposition groups weakened with time, some groups made side agreements with the military, undermining broader issues being negotiated by the opposition coalition.[41]

Balance of Power

This research assumed negotiations to be a preferred option. However, the examined cases demonstrated that the depth of enthusiasm for negotiation largely varied as a function of the perceived balance of power and the desire to avoid or minimise violence. For example, in Thailand, some protest leaders argued that civic actors were relatively weak at the time of the protests and, therefore, not in a position to negotiate effectively.[42] As a result, though some talks took place, substantive negotiations were largely off the table.

36. Interview with Egyptian Activist and Politician.
37. Interview with Thai activist and politician.
38. Interview with Sudanese Politician.
39. Interview with Sudanese Activist.
40. Interview with Sudanese Politician.
41. Interview with Egyptian Activist and Politician.
42. Interview with Thai Mediator.

By contrast, in contexts where civic actors felt they had leverage, some refused to negotiate at key junctures because they did not view state security actors or the regime as legitimate. In Pakistan, one interviewee noted that multiple human rights defenders and activists did not want to engage in dialogue with President Musharraf and the regime, as they did not consider him a valid interlocutor and felt the army should play no role in politics.[43] Nevertheless, civic actors in Pakistan were able to rely on a massive street protest movement which put them in a strong position – one which differed from case studies where civic actors garnered less public support. For the organisers, refusing to negotiate was a strategy employed to apply even more pressure on the regime.

State Security Actors as Intermediaries

In some cases, state security actors played a pivotal role in creating safe conditions for negotiation with other actors in the regime. In Thailand and Georgia, certain state security actors acted more like intermediaries or "keepers of the peace", helping to establish a secure environment where negotiations could take place without the threat of violence. For instance, a retired Georgian colonel remarked that the "main role" of the army was to "ensure the safety of the people during [the] demonstration," allowing protesters and opposition groups to remain on the streets while others negotiated.[44] A Thai police general-major similarly commented on the goal of "achieving a smooth process without losses on either side", reflecting the commitment some security actors felt towards ensuring safe negotiations.[45]

By contrast, in other cases, security forces were responsible for perpetrating violence, even while negotiations were underway. In Sudan, for example, the security forces committed a notorious massacre during a sit-in at the military headquarters in Khartoum on 3rd June 2019. More than 100 protesters were killed.

Incentives and Guarantees

The use of guarantees and incentives to encourage negotiation was evident in some cases. In Burkina Faso, interviewees mentioned the existence of a second, secret charter alongside the public Transitional Charter.[46] The second charter reportedly offered guarantees to certain state security actors, such as promotions and new positions within the armed forces following the transition. This was the case for Colonel Zida, who assumed power following President Compaoré's resignation in 2014 and led the transitional administration as Prime Minister. When the transitional period ended in 2015, Zida was promoted to the rank of general. Some civic actors were also reportedly offered roles as Burkinabé representatives to international bodies.

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43. Interview with Pakistani Activist.
44. Interview with former Georgian Colonel.
45. Interview with Thai Police Major-General.
46. Interview with retired Burkinabé Colonel.

In Sudan, security guarantees were negotiated and incorporated through a clause in the 2019 Constitutional Declaration, which granted members of the Sovereignty Council, the Cabinet, the Transitional Legislative Council, or governors of provinces/heads of regions immunity from prosecution unless revoked by a majority vote of the Legislative Council. This was particularly significant given the number of military figures involved in these councils and the many human rights abuses they had been implicated in.

These are two examples of known guarantees, but it was commonly acknowledged by interviewees that many more have been reached, but not publicly disclosed.

IV. Recommendations

The recommendations below build on those presented in IFIT's initial discussion paper and are targeted at civic and democratic actors seeking better engagements and dialogue with state security actors in hybrid regimes. Some of the research findings reinforce the original recommendations, while others are new.

The recommendations are grouped into four categories: actions to strengthen civic actors' position, engaging and building relationships, avenues for constructive engagement, and process design. Each recommendation is supported by examples from the cases and includes a list of tools, strategies, and considerations for civic actors.

Although it rarely will be feasible to follow every recommendation outlined below, implementing one in many cases can facilitate the implementation of another.

Key Actions to Strengthen Civic Actors' Position

Prior to and during engagements, the strengthening of one's own position is critical to the efficacy of responding to the other. In the case of hybrid regimes, disunity or weakness among civic actors can significantly hinder their ability to negotiate effectively. As such, civic actors must address internal dynamics of their coalition, clarify and adapt their goals to the broader context, and develop a strategic plan well in advance of any window for negotiations. By doing so, they can enhance their position and be better prepared when opportunities for engagement arise.

(1) Set Realistic, Incremental and Flexible Goals

The interests of state security actors often are built into the structure of the regime and preserving those interests – whether political, economic, or otherwise – is a key priority for them. The goals laid out by civic actors should thus be flexible and incremental.[47] A strategic approach that accounts for and understands state security actors' red lines can be critical to avoid backlash or early rejection of proposed dialogues.

In several cases, activists were unable to find ways to address or move beyond state security actors' red lines. In Thailand, for instance, one protest leader reported that negotiations "completely broke down when we brought the monarchy into the discussion", after which engagements were limited to the day-to-day policing of protests, rather than discussions about substantive issues.[48]

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47. See IFIT's work on "Partial Agreements" for a discussion of the benefits of an incremental approach to negotiations.
48. Interview with Thai Activist.

By contrast, in Myanmar, flexible goals allowed negotiations to progress. A former UN Advisor on Myanmar commented that "initially, Aung San Suu Kyi was not prepared to accept what she called an 'illegal constitution'", but she later changed her approach and "agreed to work with the government to progressively bring about a liberalisation of the constitution."[49]

This does not imply that civic actors should resort to appeasement or give up on larger goals, such as regime transformation. Rather, it suggests that they may need to adjust their timeframe and methods for achieving such goals and focus on incremental change.

When the opportunity arises for substantive and rapid change (e.g., when there is change in the balance of power), civic actors will need to be ready to engage the general public (see the recommendation below on *Build Critical Mass and Momentum*. The case of Georgia illustrates this point. One interviewee noted that protesters did not initially demand President Shevardnadze's resignation,[50] while another commented, "in the beginning, everything did not look so revolutionary."[51] However, as street protests grew and the regime remained obstinate, protesters recognised their increased street power and seized the opportunity to push for more. This culminated in a call for the President to step down – a move which he was forced to make just weeks later.

In pushing for rapid change, however, civic actors must remain aware of the issues that could provoke a serious backlash. One Peruvian interviewee noted that they had to be "less ambitious" during the transition due to limited time, resources, and the entrenched culture of Peruvian institutions.[52] Realistic goals are therefore a flexible concept, which must be informed by a rational and strategic analysis of each side's position and relative power at the time of negotiations.

Box 3: The Egyptian Revolution and Military Red Lines

During the Egyptian Revolution, it became evident that certain issues were entirely off the table for state security actors, particularly the Egyptian military. Protesters were keen to discuss the military's budget and its role in the country's economy, but one interviewee stated that this was "categorically refused" and "not open for discussion".[53] The military's control over economic matters was viewed as critical to achieving a successful transition, yet the interviewee acknowledged that "nobody was able to come up with a way in which these red lines could be crossed."[54] The inability to engage the military on these crucial issues, or to present realistic goals that the military might be willing to negotiate, was identified as a significant obstacle to successful negotiations. The same interviewee further noted that, on another issue important to the protesters – constitutional reform – an intermediate goal of constitutional amendments might have been more feasible than demanding a new constitution, which ultimately also proved unsuccessful.

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49. Interview with former UN Advisor on Myanmar.
50. Interview with Georgian Politician.
51. Interview with Georgina Politician.
52. Interview with former Peruvian Minister.
53. Interview with Egyptian Activist and Politician.
54. Ibid.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Be aware of state security actors' "red lines".
b. Use flexible goals to maintain engagement.
c. Recognise moments of increased leverage (see *Build Critical Mass and Momentum*).
d. Scale back ambitions when facing constraints.
e. Adjust timeframes and methods for achieving larger goals.
f. Avoid actions that may provoke a backlash.

(2) Prepare Strategically and Early

Almost all the examined cases revealed short windows of opportunity for negotiation or engagement. Even in cases where engagements became drawn out, most featured an initial key moment, often triggered by a shock. Civic actors must be prepared for this, with internal structures and plans in place. They should be ready to engage, have some understanding of how to approach the windows that open, and know who best to engage with when time is short.

A crucial part of strategic preparation is to continuously map and nurture relationships with the key actors and individuals who hold influence or power – both state security actors and civic leaders. Understanding their needs and demands is essential. A thorough mapping exercise offers insights into the balance of power at any given moment, as well as easing the process of governance if settlement occurs and a transition takes hold.

One Burkinabé interviewee highlighted the benefits of planning, stating, "there were many reforms during this period because the civic actors had already conducted the necessary research prior to the transition moment."[55] Several think tanks and NGOs with research expertise became involved in the Burkinabé transition, and their contributions were crucial in allowing things to move quickly.

By contrast, in Sudan, one interviewee cited the lack of preparedness and research as one of the barriers to a successful transition. They remarked that "one of the problems civilians faced was that they did not have a clear vision for military and security reform. The issue of military reform came abruptly, and there were no concrete proposals on how military reform should take place."[56] This underscores the necessity for technical expertise amongst civic actors, particularly in areas such as security or constitutional reform.

A key part of strategic planning is the continual task of risk assessment. In authoritarian-leaning hybrid regimes, which often have extensive coup-proofing mechanisms in place, there are real risks associated with engaging state security actors. Prior research ensures that civic actors are better informed of the risks of engaging and are not left groping in the dark when the window for engagement opens.

A final aspect of strategic preparation revealed in the examined cases is the importance of having clear messaging on key issues, both internally and externally. Civic actors must be able to clearly articulate their interests to maximise the chances of success and unity.

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55. Interview with Burkinabé Politician and Activist.
56. Interview with Sudanese Politician.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Map key actors and institutions, along with their power dynamics.

b. Conduct thorough research and have a detailed negotiation/transition plan.

c. Acquire the necessary technical expertise on key topics.

d. Continuously examine and update risk assessments.

e. Have consistent and effective internal communication.

(3) Build Critical Mass and Momentum

When windows for engagement open, civic actors must seek to gather critical mass and momentum. Many interviewees highlighted the importance of pushing for gains when they sensed a growing movement. Illustrating this point, one Sudanese interviewee expressed regret at not "aiming big" in their goals when they felt empowered.[57]

To create momentum and build critical mass, the examined cases showed that organisations and bodies must have the will and capacity to build a wider coalition. In Peru, the strength of the opposition's unity was notable, with opposition parties joining forces – a "strange thing" at the time, according to one interviewee.[58] This unity boosted the opposition, kept them mobilised on the streets, and ultimately contributed to Fujimori's resignation.

In Pakistan, one interviewee emphasised the importance of coming together: "It doesn't matter who you are marching next to, as long as everyone is on the same page and believes in the same goals, objectives, and purpose."[59] Protesters in Pakistan rallied around two simple core demands: the restoration of the deposed Chief Justice and of the Pakistani Constitution. These demands encouraged broadened support beyond the original movement's instigators.

Having clear and concrete demands and an endgame (see *Set Realistic, Incremental and Flexible Goals*) can also unify civic actors and build critical mass. Where demands and messaging were clear, civic actors coalesced and presented a united front. This was the case in Thailand, where student protesters issued the "Ten Demands", followed later by the condensed but unifying "Three Demands", which became the accepted programme for change. Although these demands were ultimately not accepted (partly due to a breakdown in trust and the collapse of negotiations), they were a crucial unifying factor for the protesters. A similar approach was taken in Georgia in 2003 with the "10 Steps to Liberty" platform. In Egypt, by contrast, one interviewee lamented that the failure to build a coalition between political actors and forces like the labour movement was a significant strategic error.[60]

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57. Interview with Sudanese Activist and Politician.
58. Interview with former Peruvian Minister.
59. Interview with Pakistani Activist.
60. Interview with Egyptian Activist and Politician.

Another key component to critical mass is the speed at which negotiations are held. Broad coalitions may only be sustainable for a short period and faster negotiations exert greater pressure. An interviewee in Sudan spoke to this, explaining how drawn-out negotiations caused civic forces to become "weaker day after day".[61]

Box 4: Unity and Disunity during the Malian Transition

Civic actors in the Malian Transition of 1991 united around a common cause, though the makeshift coalition broke down as the transition dragged on. While the student movement in Mali played a key role in street protests against the regime, protestors recognised that they "couldn't confront the military alone."[62] As a result, they aligned with civil society groups and opposition political parties who were also seeking support. One interviewee spoke of how they achieved "great unity" because they had, despite substantial differences in their politics, one common overarching goal: the end of the regime.[63] This broad front undoubtedly contributed to the regime's rapid fall. After realising the strength of opposition, the military refused to contribute further to the repression of their own people and overthrew the President in a coup d'état. However, once the regime collapsed and a transitional government was established, political difference became apparent and unity among civic actors and opposition groups deteriorated. This breakdown in unity weakened the negotiating position of opposition groups as the transition evolved.

■   **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a.   Maintain pressure and push for gains when momentum is on your side.

b.   Be open but strategic with partnerships to ensure alignment with shared goals.

c.   Foster unity by encouraging different organisations/actors to collaborate.

d.   Engage in continuous bridge-building both within and outside the coalition.

e.   Establish clear and concrete demands to unify civic actors and present a united front.

f.   Act quickly to take advantage of opportunities and influence negotiation outcomes.

61. Interview with Sudanese Activist.
62. Interview with Malian Activist.
63. Ibid.

Engaging and Building Relationships

As with any negotiation, dynamics between the parties are crucial. Personal relationships were found to be essential for cultivating trust, while consistent channels for dialogue helped ensure communication remained open, even during stalled or broken negotiations. Additionally, efforts to humanise the "other side" were vital for reducing tensions and lowering the risk of violence.

(4) Cultivate Trust via Strong Personal Relationships

Trust is naturally an important variable and, drawing from the examined cases, what this recommendation highlights is how to establish it.

In many cases, the importance of neutral spaces for engagement and the role of intermediaries and neutral actors was highlighted. A particularly significant issue was the role of personal relationships, which were often central to encouraging engagement and maintaining a healthy flow of communication and information between the parties.

For instance, in Mali, a retired Colonel stated that good links and relationships between and among state security actors and civic actors was a key ingredient in the success of negotiations, and that without these contacts, achieving a peaceful transition would have been far more complicated.[64] Similarly, a former Georgian Colonel suggested that without a good relationship between certain civic actors and intelligence officials, "they would have remained protestors until the end."[65]

Another recurring theme was the connections retained by defectors from the regime. In Burkina Faso, for example, former members of the ruling party who had since defected played a crucial role in establishing contact with state security actors, having pre-existing relationships with individuals from their time within the regime. Similarly, in Georgia, several members of the opposition movement, including opposition leaders Mikheil Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania, had previously served as MPs in the ruling party before defecting and forming their own movement. This gave way to contact with the regime when the transitional moment arrived. A crucial one-on-one dialogue with the Minister of Defence was possible in part because a Georgian opposition politician had a pre-existing relationship, and even maybe a "friendship", with the minister prior to the events of the Rose Revolution.[66]

In contrast, cases with very low levels of trust, such as Myanmar, Sudan, and Thailand, experienced some of the worst outcomes, with a full breakdown of negotiations in Thailand and civil war in Myanmar and Sudan. In Sudan, one interviewee stated, "we never trusted the military," which, given the power-sharing agreement between civic and state security actors, proved to be a major hindrance to the transition.[67] Similarly, a former

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64. Interview with retired Malian Colonel.
65. Interview with retired Georgian Colonel.
66. Interview with Georgian Politician.
67. Interview with Sudanese Politician.

ambassador to Myanmar commented, "I don't think there was any real trust-building exercise or efforts between the military and the NLD."[68]

In the latter two cases, the regimes were much more entrenched, and the gap between civic and state security actors was much wider, creating additional challenges in establishing personal relationships and building trust. In more repressive hybrid regimes, not only can it be more difficult to establish contacts and trust, but it may also be more dangerous for civic and state security actors alike.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Maintain personal relationships with strategic actors.

b. Utilise neutral or safe spaces for engagements.

c. Leverage intermediaries or neutral actors (e.g., persons and/or institutions).

d. Leverage the connections and networks of regime defectors (see *Retired State Security Actors*).

e. Capitalise on pre-existing relationships of family, friends and allies.

(5) Maintain Consistent Channels for Dialogue

Across cases, interviewees emphasised the importance of having existing contacts and continuous dialogue between and among civic and state security actors. Even before windows of opportunity arise for potential political openings, actors should engage in or attempt to initiate regular dialogue to ensure channels are open and contact points are established. These spaces can be formal or informal, but the crucial issue is that channels remain open.

In Mali, contact between some civic and state security actors was established before the coup d'état and subsequent transition, helping to smooth the process.[69] Referencing Burkina Faso, a Burkinabé interviewee suggested that the rapid establishment of a transitional government – a process which took around two weeks – was likely due to pre-existing dialogue and connections between the parties.[70] The existing channels made it easier to institutionalise relationships into the civilian-military transitional government.

In Thailand, an interviewee noted that one intermediary faced difficulties getting parties to engage. In order to maintain dialogue, they shifted to "unofficial" engagement, which proved more successful. Talks were moved from parliament to more casual and neutral venues like restaurants or simpler meeting rooms, frequently inviting lower-ranking police and military officers for coffee or lunch to foster ongoing dialogue.[71] Another Thai interviewee mentioned that students felt safer discussing issues in foreign embassies or in academic settings.[72] These different approaches adopted in Thailand demonstrate

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68. Interview with former Ambassador to Myanmar.

69. Interview with former Malian Ambassador.

70. Interview with Burkinabé Politician and Activist.

71. Interview with Thai Professor and Intermediary.

72. Interview with Thai Professor and Intermediary.

the flexibility required to ensure that channels stay open. Thai activists nevertheless struggled to institutionalise or advance these relationships beyond the individual level, which led to the negotiations stalling.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Foster dialogue and engagement, even before opportunities for negotiation arise.
b. Find creative ways to engage, especially when the other side is unresponsive or hesitant.
c. Utilise neutral settings and spaces where people feel freer to speak.
d. Institutionalise relationships by advancing them beyond the individual level.
e. Use informal dialogue to build trust and maintain communication (See *Informality*).

(6) Humanise Opponents

Efforts to humanise the other side and appeal to their morality were crucial to successful negotiations, reducing tensions, and lowering the risk of violence. This approach was evident in several cases, including Georgia, Thailand, Egypt, and Burkina Faso. In Egypt, for example, protesters emphasised to the security forces, "You are our backbone. You are very important to us. We embrace you. You are our brothers and sisters."[73]

Similarly, in Georgia, an activist recounted how, in an engagement with a police officer on the street, the officer said, "it's not your fault what you are doing, we know that you are a good person", and referred to the importance of the protests for the future of their families.[74]

In both Georgia and Egypt, protesters had physical interactions with security forces by shaking hands and giving them hugs. In some cases they provided them with gifts like food or flowers. These gestures reduced tension, creating space to find common ground and build pressure at the top to negotiate.

In Thailand, intermediaries used this strategy to humanise protesters in the eyes of state security institutions, reminding them that civic actors were simply fellow citizens with legitimate concerns about the country's future.[75]

73. Interview with Egyptian Activist and Politician.
74. Interview with Georgian Activist.
75. Interview with Thai Mediator.

Box 5: Appealing to Security Forces' Sense of Duty in Burkina Faso

Humanisation of the other was central to several engagements in Burkina Faso. One concrete example occurred in the aftermath of the 2015 counter-coup attempt, when elements of the RPS tried to depose the transitional government and end the transition process. One interviewee shared their experience of protesting in front of a military base in Burkina Faso's second-largest city, Bobo-Dioulasso. In a direct engagement, the civil society activist described how they appealed to soldiers to resist the counter-coup and support the transition. Referencing the military's moral duty, "We told them that … they had a unique opportunity to free the country from this group of outlaws."[76] The activist also mentioned how they emphasised the "historical chance" the soldiers had to reconnect with the people, and how the population felt "orphaned" by the army.[77] The activist recounted the positive reception of these comments, with soldiers at the camp promising they would respond to the developing situation. Ultimately, the army – both in Bobo-Dioulasso and across the country – decided to resist the counter-coup, which was successfully defeated.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Emphasise shared identities to foster connection (e.g., family, brother/sisterhood).
b. Use intermediaries who highlight the shared humanity of both sides (see *Intermediaries*).
c. Demonstrate empathy towards the other side's situation, duties, and responsibilities.
d. Engage in positive physical interactions to reduce tension where possible (e.g., shaking hands, hugging).
e. Provide symbolic gifts as acts of goodwill when appropriate (e.g., flowers).

Avenues for Constructive Engagement

The cases examined in this research revealed that a diverse spectrum of actors can initiate and facilitate dialogue and serve as entry points. Intermediaries can help bring parties together and monitor their conduct, while middle- and lower-rank officers, as well as retired officers, can be approached as state security actors with weaker ties to the regime. The media can also play a role as conduit for expressing key messages when face-to-face negotiations become challenging.

(7) Intermediaries

Third-party intermediaries played an important role in many cases. In some, they acted as deterrents to violence or escalation. Their mere presence discouraged actors from resorting to more extreme tactics. In others, they played a more active and direct role, facilitating or encouraging spaces for dialogue and engagement. In such cases, they often helped to remove concerns about bias, whilst also providing a safe environment in which trust could be built and opinions could be expressed with less fear.

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76. Interview with Burkinabé Activist.
77. Ibid.

In Thailand, this issue was vital. For example, the Strategic Nonviolence Commission (SNC) helped to create a safe space for both civic and state security actors where they could openly and freely discuss issues related to the transition.[78] A Thai police general-major also referenced the importance of staying neutral when policing protests and ensuring there existed "no double standards".[79]

However, the role of intermediaries is not without risks. In Sudan, for example, some interviewees criticised the role played by the African Union (AU), which requested that both sides keep negotiations secret. This was felt to have weakened the position of civic actors, who wanted negotiations to be public with the purpose of maintaining pressure on state security actors.

In Burkina Faso, the role of ECOWAS and the AU was also controversial. One interviewee commented that ECOWAS and the AU had a positive impact by acting as arbitrators, whereby they ensured that actors kept to the transitional timeline through commitments made to ECOWAS and the AU while also reducing the risk of violence.[80] Yet, another interviewee felt that they negatively interfered, lacking a proper understanding of the context of negotiations, at one point bringing together numerous different actors in one big meeting (which backfired) rather than holding side talks and engagements beforehand.[81]

Interviewees reiterated that while intermediaries, including facilitators and mediators, generally play a positive role, they too have their own interests and objectives and these can affect their impartial positioning.

Box 6: The Role of Intermediaries during the Peruvian Transition

In Peru, intermediaries nurtured political dialogue. This largely took place via OAS efforts to create a forum where the opposition could coalesce around Valentín Paniagua as the interim leader. They offered technical expertise, contributing to key milestones such as the restructuring of Peru's military and intelligence services, and were seen as effective in fostering "very mature [inter-group] relationships."[82] The OAS dialogue platform promoted positive relationships, enabling priorities to slowly shift towards national interests over personal or party interests. As one interviewee noted, "I attribute [the success of the transition to] relationships we established at the OAS dialogue table," commending the decision to emphasise "the interest of the nation, the interest of the country, the interest of democracy."[83] Beyond the OAS, foreign diplomats and experts like Narcís Serra (former Spanish Defence Minister) were brought in to advise on Peru's efforts to reform its security and intelligence sectors, an engagement that ended up lasting many years. One of the participants noted that when Serra pressed him on why ministers were always rushing their work, he told him that "in Peru, ministers don't last as long as you did in Spain. I'm only in my second year, uncertain of how long I'll remain."[84]

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78. Interview with Thai Intermediary.
79. Interview with Thai Police Major-General.
80. Interview with Burkinabé Politician and Activist.
81. Interview with retired Burkinabé Colonel.
82. Interview with retired Peruvian Minister.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Consider intermediaries to act as monitors or deterrents against violence and escalation.

b. Assess the potential biases and interests of intermediaries before engaging them.

c. Encourage any approved intermediaries to participate in both informal and formal dialogue spaces.

d. Use intermediaries strategically to bridge technical gaps.

(8) Middle- and Lower-Rank Officers

The potential entry point offered by middle- and lower-rank officers was identified in IFIT's original discussion paper. Officers and individuals within the middle rank of security forces are less likely to benefit from the regime and are therefore more open to democratic change. They are also likely to be the actors required to use violence against their own people in the name of the regime – in many instances, demonstrating a reluctance to do so. Moreover, in the case of middle-rank officers in particular, they can potentially play a go-between role, able to positively influence both the top brass and the rank and file.

In Sudan, for example, one interviewee reported direct coordination between protesters and younger officers in the army during key moments of the protests.[85] Similarly, in Mali, one interviewee highlighted the positive relationship between protesters and younger officers, with many junior officers expressing support for democracy.[86] Junior officers were seen as less likely to benefit economically, as they experienced poor living conditions and irregular payments, giving them more incentive to consider change. In Peru, one interviewee found that rank-and-file police officers frustrated with corruption and the syphoning-off of resources by their superiors proved "a fundamental ally in the reform process."[87]

Despite the potential benefits of this kind of engagement, it is a relatively high-risk approach, as it can threaten security sector hierarchies and provoke regime reprisals. However, the upside can be significant where conditions allow for this category of outreach.

Box 7: Street Engagements during the Rose Revolution

Engagement with middle- and low-ranking soldiers and police officers was central to the street protests that led to the Rose Revolution in 2003. Protesters frequently faced the security forces and used these encounters to their advantage, engaging with them on a human level. Most of those tasked with policing the protests were rank-and-file soldiers and police, or low-ranking officers. Rather than criticising them for their role in supporting the regime, activists shook hands with them and encouraged them to participate in change. One interviewee emphasised that during this engagement, "we never, ever blamed them for what they were doing", placing the responsibility instead on those at the top who had given the orders.[88] The Rose Revolution earned its name because protesters handed out roses to the

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85. Interview with Sudanese Politician and Activist.

86. Interview with Malian Activist.

87. Interview with former Peruvian Minister.

88. Interview with Georgian Activist.

police and soldiers as a peace offering, similar to the flower distribution by protesters during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, where they gave flowers to soldiers manning tanks. Georgia also had extremely high levels of corruption, and many state security actors went unpaid for months. Protesters seized this as an opportunity, advocating that a change in government would improve the living and working conditions for the underpaid security forces. These gestures of humanity contributed to wavering loyalty among the rank-and-file, and a Georgian colonel recounted that individual officers and subordinates began to state that they would "not go against the people".[89] The security forces ultimately allowed protesters to storm parliament, leading to President Shevardnadze's resignation.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Engage middle-rank officers who can influence both higher command and rank-and-file.

b. Identify and engage with officers who have horizontal mobility (e.g., across different state security groups and institutions).

c. Exercise caution, as this may provoke regime backlash or destabilise existing security sector structures.

d. Engage low-rank officers with a view to creating positive leverage for talks, rather than addressing substantive issues directly with them.

(9) Retired State Security Actors

As with middle-rank officers, the strategic and constructive engagement of retired state security actors can be valuable, especially those who rose high in the ranks. In several of the examined cases, retired officials played key roles, whether as intermediaries, mediators, or through direct involvement in engagements. In Sudan, several retired officers formed part of the main opposition platform, the FFC. In Mexico and Myanmar, retired officers played significant roles in talks and in the transition.

These actors were often respected senior figures from the security sector, with an influence on politics, the ruling party, or those still actively serving within state security institutions. This influence allowed them to affect decision-making. For example, in the Lawyers' Movement for the Restoration of Judiciary in Pakistan, two former heads of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and several former three-star generals participated in protests against the regime. Such influence, if exerted in the right fashion, can be critical for the success of negotiations.

Retired security officials may be more likely to participate out of a sense of duty, particularly if they feel the institution they were once part of has fallen into corruption, suffers from low professional standards, or is working against the country's interests. In Pakistan, a former member of the ISI stated that many retired officers felt an "obligation" to participate and "raise our voice", in light of the damage being done to Pakistan by President Musharraf, himself a military official.[90]

89. Interview with retired Georgian Colonel.
90. Interview with retired member of ISI Pakistan.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Involve retired security officials in negotiations or dialogues as intermediaries, mediators or advisors.

b. Engage retired officials with gravitas to help persuade current personnel to support democratic reforms.

c. Invite retired officials to provide insights on regime dynamics and structures.

d. Involve retired officials in public acts where possible, to lend authority and legitimacy to dialogue and reform efforts.

(10) The Media

In many of the examined cases the media played an important role, both as a mechanism for monitoring state security actors and as a channel for expressing ideas or positions. Especially in situations where it was difficult or impossible for both parties to negotiate, the media served as a conduit for communicating concerns and expectations. For example, in Pakistan, where direct negotiations were sparse, media exposure became crucial for conveying messages. As one interviewee noted, "protest was through media means."[91]

The media can also be essential in advance of face-to-face negotiations, functioning as a mechanism for signalling intentions and testing the regime's response. A cautious approach, possibly involving media outreach, can gauge the appetite for dialogue and uncover potential entry points.

In Sudan, one interviewee stressed that media transparency could have helped sustain public pressure on state security actors, which was lacking due to the secretive nature of negotiations. In Georgia, pro-democracy activists highlighted the role of *Rustavi 2*, a media channel that amplified their demands. One activist mentioned using an appearance on state media to challenge the regime's narrative.[92] A pivotal moment came when a special forces regiment publicly declared on television that they would "not use weapons and force against the people",[93] placing pressure on other state security actors to follow suit.

The media also functions as a restraint on state security actors. Publicising protests makes it harder for security forces to clamp down without facing public backlash. In more recent cases, social media has emerged as a powerful organising tool for civic actors, especially in Egypt, Thailand and Myanmar. It is likely to grow in importance in future engagements. Yet, social media is also increasingly used as a tool for repression, as seen in Thailand, where several activists faced prison sentences for online posts criticising the monarchy during the 2020–22 protests.

91. Interview with Pakistani Lawyer.
92. Interview with Georgian Activist.
93. Interview with retired Georgian Colonel.

Box 8: The Media during the Thai Protests

Traditional and new media played a diverse role during the Thai protests. For example, social media was a vital organising tool at one stage, and many protesters "learned about these events [protests] through social media", despite government attempts to censor information.[94] Protesters also used more traditional media outlets as a platform for their activities and demands. Interviewees noted that the media played a dual role: "to communicate with those in power, but also to explain what we are trying to do to the public."[95] Most importantly, media coverage offered protection to protest leaders. As one interviewee commented, "I am alive today, not dead yet, because of the media. I think, if the media went back to what it was in the 1970s, I would not be here."[96]

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Use media to communicate positions and expectations, especially when direct negotiations are challenging.
b. Engage with different forms to gauge the regime's response on key issues before face-to-face negotiations.
c. Encourage coverage of protests to deter security forces from taking repressive actions.
d. Utilise social media as an organising and mobilisation tool, with a view to opening dialogue and engagement possibilities.

Process Design

Dialogue and engagement formats naturally varied across the examined cases, with certain practices recurring more than others. Ensuring the process was "inclusive enough" was often important to securing the minimum support needed for any agreement. Consistent informal engagements played a crucial role, too, especially in starting negotiations or sustaining momentum when faced with the breakdown of formal talks. In some instances, secret negotiations were necessary to address sensitive issues, though this approach carried risks.

(11) "Inclusive Enough" Participation

Both state security and civic actors highlighted the importance of representation in engagements to ensure that negotiations, or their outcomes, do not later unravel. For example, a retired Malian colonel emphasised the importance of both civic-military representation and gender representation, noting that the Malian transitional government incorporated gender parity and equal representation for civic and state security actors.[97] In Sudan, an interviewee stressed the importance of incorporating "wide societal traditions" and "acting on many lines" to ensure negotiated reforms gained broad acceptance.[98]

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94. Interview with Thai activist and politician.
95. Interview with Thai activist.
96. Ibid.
97. Interview with retired Malian Colonel.
98. Interview with Sudanese Activist and Politician.

The premise articulated across multiple interviews is that the more inclusive the process, the more sustainable the outcome. Stakeholders from across different parts of the security sector, political parties, religious or traditional leaders, civil society groups, business leaders, youth groups, and unions, often have a shared minimal interest in the country's future. All of these groups should thus be encouraged to participate in dialogue or at least have their voice heard by indirect means.

In Burkina Faso, there was a particularly strong focus on inclusion. A retired Burkinabé colonel noted that the military worked to include representatives from the deposed regime, believing that "the political process could be biased later if they did not participate in the drafting of the charter."[99] As a result, the Burkinabé transitional charter of 2014 included an agreement "signed by all groups: former majority, opposition party, defence and security forces, and customary and religious authorities."[100] This inclusive approach contributed to cohesion and unity in the short term and may have helped the Transitional Government successfully resist a counter-coup attempt in 2015.

Nevertheless, while inclusion is important, speed or secrecy during engagements may necessarily test the limits of inclusion (see recommendation on *Secrecy*). A standard of "inclusive enough" participation may be the optimal criterion.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a.   Involve diverse stakeholders, including civic groups, security actors, and political parties, to ensure broad support.
b.   Aim for gender and social representation to address varied perspectives and needs.
c.   Balance inclusivity with efficiency, adapting representation according to negotiation urgency and secrecy.
d.   Include representatives from the former regime to reduce future resistance to reforms.
e.   Use an "inclusive enough" metric to balance inclusion with efficiency.

(12) Informality

Most of the engagements that were studied did not involve or reflect substantial process design. They instead began as informal, ad-hoc efforts that eventually evolved into more formal negotiations and, when settlement was possible, into full transitions.

In Thailand, for example, one interviewee commented that it was necessary to "establish a robust informal system and gradually formalise" the process of negotiations. The interviewee remarked that without the informal first step, "dialogue in Thailand tends to collapse."[101] In both Mali and Burkina Faso, the initially rather chaotic phases of political opening saw many examples of informal dialogue which eventually opened the door to formalised transitional governments.

99.   Interview with retired Burkinabé Colonel.
100.   Interview with retired Burkinabé Colonel.
101.   Interview with Thai Intermediary.

In several cases, informal engagements took place suddenly and unexpectedly. In Georgia, interviewees reflected on the importance of spontaneous engagement with state security actors on the streets as they protested.[102] Some of these were crucial in drawing the regime into more serious negotiations off the street. Civic actors should therefore be prepared for informal engagements to take place anytime and anywhere.

Informal spaces for dialogue should be maintained even when discussions shift to more formal settings. When formal negotiations regress or break down, informal negotiations should be kept alive, acting as a backup option to help steer the formal process back on track. If these channels are not kept open, contact between the parties can quickly revert to zero, a position from which it is much harder to reopen formal negotiations.

Among the case studies, engagements that lacked informal spaces for dialogue struggled to make progress. Interviewees in Myanmar heavily criticised this absence, with one noting that without informal spaces, it was impossible "to break down some of the distrust that existed."[103] Another interviewee recounted a 2018 conversation with a senior leader who advised that the stakeholders had agreed to "set up a committee for informal dialogue." [104] The irony of organising a committee for what should have been informal discussions underscored a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept of informal dialogue, highlighting the weak communication between civic and state security actors in Myanmar.

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a.   Establish informal dialogue channels before transitioning to formal negotiations.
b.   Be prepared for informal spaces to open and up close down spontaneously.
c.   Maintain informal communication channels alongside formal negotiations to act as a backstop or, in some cases, a back channel.
d.   Create informal spaces where sensitive topics can be discussed freely, helping to break down barriers and introduce new issues into the conversation.

(13) Secrecy

Secrecy is a tool that was occasionally necessary to address sensitive issues in the examined engagements. Secret negotiations were reported in cases including Mali, Sudan, Thailand, Peru, and Burkina Faso, though many details understandably remain hidden.

Issues like guarantees or incentives for state security actors, which are often controversial, particularly if they involve individuals who have been involved in criminal activity, may require secret pacts in extreme cases. While there is a new and understandable importance attached to accountability, addressing these issues may require unorthodox approaches, especially when they are objective deal-breakers. This was the case of the second, secretive charter in Burkina Faso, which provided guarantees for state security actors.

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102. Interview with Georgian Politician.
103. Interview with former Ambassador to Myanmar.
104. Interview with former Ambassador to Myanmar.

In Mali, secret negotiations were reportedly the trigger for the initial stages of the transition.[105] One interviewee reported that civic actors conducted clandestine outreach to the military, which encouraged the removal of President Traoré and the installation of a transitional government. This eventually led to the widely participative "National Conference" to decide the country's future.

Peru experienced a similar process. Secretive negotiations were used to encourage Fujimori's allies to step down from the presidential line of succession, giving them a credible off-ramp while allowing opposition leader Valentín Paniagua to assume the presidency and formalise the transition process.[106]

These two examples were not without risk given the high stakes involved. Civic actors must therefore be mindful of certain "do's" and "don'ts" of process design for secret talks, including around the safety of parties. In more repressive contexts when contact is first established, or where there is the potential for violence, both civic and state security actors may have to take measures to protect their identity. For example, in Sudan, when negotiating with the military before President Bashir was removed, one interviewee reported that, even when making contact with those deemed "Pro-Revolution Officers" they used a US phone number and a fake name, given the dangers involved.[107]

Ultimately, it is crucial for parties to balance the need for secrecy with the demand for transparency to prevent negotiations from being delegitimised in the eyes of the public. Striking this balance helps maintain the credibility of the process while addressing sensitive issues that may not be suitable for discussion under the public gaze.[108]

■ **Tools, Strategies and Considerations for Civic Actors**

a. Use secrecy as a tool for addressing sensitive issues or when required to protect the identity of individuals.
b. Strike a balance between secrecy and transparency to maintain the legitimacy of the negotiation process.
c. Be mindful of the risks of secret engagements, as they tend to carry higher risks if they fail or backfire.

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105. Ibid.
106. Interview with former Peruvian Minister.
107. Interview with Sudanese Politician and Activist.
108. For more information on some of the impacts of opting for secrecy, see IFIT's work on "Process Design for Secret Negotiations"

v. Conclusion

This paper has analysed engagements and negotiations between civic and state security actors in hybrid regimes, as well as the context surrounding engagements and the hybrid regimes themselves. A total of ten country case studies were examined, drawing on 35 interviews with actors directly involved in, or with direct knowledge of, specific outreach and dialogue attempts.

The primary aim of the paper is to provide recommendations to civic actors seeking to engage with state security actors. As such, the recommendations concentrate, among other things, on the importance of establishing achievable objectives and anticipating backlash; conducting thorough research, mapping key actors, and having detailed plans; unifying different actors to exert pressure during key moments; cultivating trust through ongoing dialogue and drawing upon personal relationships; maintaining open communication channels even before formal negotiations begin; using personalised gestures to reduce tensions and the risk of violence; leveraging the role of neutral parties; focusing outreach efforts on state security actors with vertical and horizontal reach; drawing on the influence and experience of former security personnel; employing traditional and social media to convey demands and signal intentions; pragmatically including diverse stakeholders to strengthen legitimacy; using informal approaches as a fallback option; and balancing secrecy for sensitive issues with transparency for legitimacy.

Yet, the paper's findings and recommendations must be understood with limitations. As multiple interviewees pointed out, hybrid regimes and the negotiations that take place in these contexts are unique across multiple dimensions. Also, while we found some evidence to suggest that cases of "better" engagements (e.g., higher levels of trust, better quality of dialogue) achieved longer periods of democratic stability compared to those with "worse" engagements (e.g., extensive distrust, insincere engagements and motivations), this research does not seek to establish causal relationships between negotiations and the long-term democratic outcomes of countries.

Engaging state security actors will remain challenging for civic actors operating in hybrid regime contexts. Future research could further explore sources of regime resilience, civic and state security actor narratives, more in-depth insider analysis of state security bodies, process tracing of negotiation impacts on long-term transitions, and further analysis of the external context and how it impacted negotiations. For now, however, there are scores of salient lessons that can help civic actors to have more success in planning and executing their outreach, engagement and dialogue efforts in the largely opaque conditions that accompany all hybrid regimes.

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