WORLD MOVEMENT *for*
DEMOCRACY

CROSSOVER

SHIFTING FROM
CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM
TO POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

Political transitions present an opportunity for leaders to implement democratic reforms, build institutions, and foster a democratic citizenry. Civil society activists sometimes have the opportunity to join government following political transitions because of their leadership skills, technical expertise, and profile within their communities. Crossing over from the civil society sector to government as elected or appointed officials may afford them new avenues to advance reform and consolidate democracy.

Those who do cross over to government service have sometimes struggled to navigate the complexity of issues, relationships, structures, and processes to advance reform agendas in their new environment. Moreover, they may encounter weak institutions, entrenched political interests, and inefficient bureaucratic systems that frustrate their ambitions. Their perceived inability to overcome these challenges and institute democratic reforms in a timely manner may contribute to frustration among the public with governance reform processes and democracy more broadly.

To achieve success, civil society activists need to be aware of the political, institutional, and technical challenges they will face in governing and make a personal transition of their own from being outspoken advocates outside of the government to being effective reformers within government. This involves developing political skills such as creating and expanding coalitions of reform-minded colleagues across party lines; putting in place new political processes and structures; communicating effectively with the public; and drafting and promoting new policies or legislation. Preparing civil society activists to lead in government may be an important strategy for protecting fledgling democracies against backsliding and contribute to successful democratic transition.

This report captures the reflections of activists who have crossed over from civil society into government so that others might learn from their experiences.

In particular, it provides insight on the following questions:

+ What are the challenges those who cross over face in government?
+ What strategies, skills, tools, and mechanisms enable success?
+ What is the relational dynamic between those who cross over and their civil society and government colleagues?
+ How do former activists' agendas or priorities shift while in office?
+ What does successfully advancing democratic reform look like for those who cross over?
+ Is "crossover" an effective strategy for advancing democracy?

> ***"It was natural: there was a political breakthrough and a call came from my country. I had to respond. It was a euphoria that created opportunities for us to build the country we wanted: a democracy. We never had an opportunity like this before, so when it happened, I didn't even think about it. I only asked myself: how could I add value to the process?[1]"***

1 This survey was conducted anonymously; no attribution is provided for direct quotes.

Twenty-seven activists who crossed over from civil society into government following political transition in 13 countries between 1987 to 2019 were interviewed for this survey.[2] They represent diverse backgrounds having moved from different spheres of activism – including human rights, gender and inclusion, conflict resolution, social reform, anti-corruption, transparency and accountability, open data, and youth – into government. Fourteen male and thirteen female respondents, who ranged from 23 to 60 years of age when they crossed over, participated in the survey. [3]

Eighteen interviewees held national government positions, four held local positions, and two held both local and national-level positions. Nine were elected to parliament and 21 were appointed to positions in executive branches of government such as ministries or other bodies. Three of these individuals were both elected and appointed to office during their careers. Individuals who held positions in technical bodies, such as elections commissions or other apolitical agencies, were not included in the survey.

Each of the interviewees said that they saw the opportunity for them to support democratic reform following a political transition in their country by crossing over. They also agreed that democracy remains the most viable path to advancing prosperous societies. However, the challenges of governance are myriad and complex. While this survey derives initial insights regarding challenges that activists who enter government commonly face, the survey is not a comprehensive study of the different contexts, experiences, challenges, and outcomes of those in government.

DECIDING TO CROSS OVER

While a change of national political landscape may occur relatively abruptly, political transitions take place over the course of many years, or even decades. Those interviewed crossed over into government at different stages in their nations' political transition. They felt that the moment in which they decided to cross over into government during their nation's transition determined the nature of the challenges and opportunities they encountered in government. Additionally, these challenges and opportunities varied significantly across country and regional contexts.

Not surprisingly, it was noted that one's specific role in government also determined the nature of one's experience. For example, those who were appointed to ministerial positions were expected to serve the national interest under a head of state, rather than the interests of a particular community of voters. In such cases, it was essential for them to maintain the trust of the individual who appointed them to their position. Those who were elected, on the other hand, were accountable to their voters and may also have been accountable to a political party that supported their electoral campaign. They found it necessary to maintain the trust of their party and their constituency, which sometimes included individuals that did not support their candidacy or their agendas.

Considerations

Many of the interviewees recalled asking themselves a number of questions prior to crossing over into government. Retrospectively, they found this useful in ensuring that they were making the correct decision for themselves, their cause, and their country. The questions focused on understanding one's goals, principles, and priorities, and the likelihood one could successfully advance them in government. Those questions included, but were not limited to, the following:

2 Interviewees represented Argentina, Chile, Georgia, Kenya, Liberia, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines, South Africa, Taiwan, Tunisia, and Ukraine.

3 This paper was also informed by focus groups discussion that took place in 2018, prior to the survey.

- Are my values and principles clear?
- Do my values and principles closely align with the government or party?
- Am I willing to compromise on my values and principles? If so, which ones and in what ways?
- Am I willing to live a life of scrutiny?
- How does this add value to my career?
- Is the government I will enter committed to democratic reform?
- Would I cross over into government alone or with a larger group of civil society colleagues?
- Is government essential for the reform(s) I seek?
- Could I work within a political party to advance democratic reform?

Consultations

Interviewees in both elected and appointed positions discussed the importance of consulting with a variety of individuals, organizations, and communities before crossing over into government. Some said that they were apprehensive about crossing over because they were unsure how their colleagues in civil society would react. One admitted that she felt a great deal of uncertainty about what her civil society colleagues would think if she crossed over. Following consultations with them, however, she realized she had their strong support, which allowed her to feel more confident in deciding to cross over.

Another recalled that he initially refused an invitation to join his government because he had long spoken out against its institutions and policies. However, consultations with colleagues in civil society helped him recognize how joining this new government, which had been democratically elected, would allow him to promote a series of reforms that he had long worked to achieve. After he arrived in government, one of his first actions was to consult with members of civil society, unions, and the private sector to set an agenda for his time in office. He reflected that being open regarding his decision to cross over and transparent in establishing an agenda for his time in office led to better reform outcomes and less skepticism about his commitment and performance.

In addition to helping one decide whether or not to cross over, consultations were helpful for those interviewed to:

- Assess the degree of support one could expect from communities;
- Identify issues around which greater trust would be need to be built;
- Understand citizens' priorities;
- Clarify what one hoped to accomplish and develop political and reform agendas;
- Help citizens and former civil society colleagues understand the limitations those who cross over into government might face in their new role; and,
- Explore ways in which civil society could contribute to reforms.

Individuals who held consultations with civil society prior to crossing over noted the value of continuing consultations with civil society while in government. This helped them to communicate their positions on issues and challenges, build and maintain trust, and demonstrate transparency and accountability.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES OF GOVERNANCE

The survey identified a set of common challenges, regardless of the specific circumstances under which one crosses over into government. While civil society often has strong familiarity with governance and legal processes, many interviewees admitted that they were unaware of the extent to which bureaucracy, institutional structures, and technical procedures would complicate their work.

This affected many interviewees' ability to set and stick to an agenda, coordinate across agencies, lead reforms processes, and communicate with the public, among others. Several noted that policies and procedures within their institutions did not always "make sense," which complicated their ability to further reform.

> *"... once you go in, you understand the constraints and limitations that you have. Seen from the outside, you think it is all about policy or legal choices, but then you get to see that it is far from being only about that: there are other administrative constraints and political constraints. It is not as simple as it appears.*

As a result, several interviewees said they struggled to execute tasks such as developing budgets, overseeing procurements, filing expenditures, conducting audits, and managing personnel. Those who crossed over commonly encountered contradicting interpretations of how bureaucracy and governance should work, particularly in transitional contexts.

> *"When there is something wrong with a procedure, [bureaucrats] would just put an extra layer of control and compliance - instead of addressing the original problem."*

> *"The challenges had to do with the complexity of the rules that were in place, and not understanding the logic of these rules and regulations. Sometimes the interpretation of a rule by one leader or another can be different. The rules don't change but the interpretation does.*

Some individuals felt that they had to go through a "relearning" process upon entering government. In addition to understanding how the government operated, they had to figure out how their soft skills, such as management and coalition building, applied in their new context.

Building a Team

A number of the interviewees noted that a mistake they made when entering government was building a team that prioritized technical skills, such as building a budget, over political experience and institutional knowledge. Others credited their success in government in part to their ability to build a diverse team that included individuals with each of these elements, which allowed them to work on substantive issues while skillfully navigating complex government structures. Additionally, some individuals stated that strong external communication skills were necessary for teams to convey positions, build support, and maintain accountability to their constituents.

Developing Relationships to Advance Reforms

Regardless of one's position within government, interviewees found it vitally important to understand how to develop, maintain, and leverage relationships with government colleagues, civil society, and international partners. However, some found it particularly challenging to satisfy the expectations of their colleagues in civil society and their colleagues in government at the same time.

As one interviewee put it:

> *"You have to be careful about making decisions that balance the interests of your colleagues in the bureaucracy and your constituency, including your former colleagues in civil society, so you do not alienate potential allies.*

Maintaining Relationships with Civil Society:

Many of those who crossed over expected to serve as a bridge between civil society and government. However, positioning one's self to serve in this capacity requires a deliberate strategy and planning. Some of those interviewed reflected that soon after they joined government they felt isolated

from civil society for a variety of reasons, including a perception among civil society that government is inherently corrupt and that they must now be corrupt as well. Others said they were initially able to maintain their relationships with civil society, but found it difficult to retain civil society's confidence over time due to the compromises they made or because the government they were serving was slow to initiate desired reforms.

One interviewee said:

> ***"Civil society expects you to still speak out as you once did. But the relationships, obligations, and expectations of your position in government may not allow you to act in this way."***

Another reflected:

> ***"This is the biggest challenge, when you cross over you have to bring your political base. There is a lot of tension there because you are leaving [civil society] for political positions. So there must be a focus on keeping the link between [civil society] leaders who cross over and civil society/the people.***

Some of those interviewed argued that it was important to be transparent with civil society about the expectations of their new position, and how these expectations dictated what they could and could not achieve. This included being clear about the challenges and limitations of their new role in government. Clarifying these considerations helped some of those interviewed redefine relationships with former colleagues in civil society in a heathy way that allowed them to identify promising opportunities for collaboration with civil society colleagues in the future.

Establishing Partnerships and Coalitions in Government:

> ***"It didn't matter how good my ideas were if I didn't have support from others to implement them.***

Several interviewees found it difficult to create strong working relationships with colleagues in government, which were seen as being critical to one's success. Many interviewees felt that civil society leaders who recently joined government were disregarded by longer standing politicians for being "too idealistic" and lacking an understanding of how the government works. Conversely, activists who crossed over into government admitted being skeptical about some of their longer-standing colleagues' commitment to reform. Others in appointed positions even suspected that the government was taking advantage of their clean public image to bolster the government's reputation for transparency and accountability while not earnestly advancing these principles.

A few interviewees said that their agendas aligned relatively well with a party's or an administration's agenda. In such cases, they were able to develop relationships with supporters of that shared agenda relatively easily. However, this was not always the case, particularly for those in elected offices whose priorities did not align perfectly with that of their parties. In such cases, many found it necessary to create cross-party coalitions, such as women's caucuses, among individuals who could vote together on certain issues despite the positions of their respective parties. Cross-party coalitions allowed them to leverage the support they needed to advance reforms when they were unable to gain support within their own party. Several interviewees credited their ability to develop coalitions to their experience building consensus in diverse communities while in civil society.

The survey also found it useful to build partnerships with people in government they did not share positions and opinions with, but with whom they could exchange political support on certain occasions. This sometimes required a degree of negotiation whereby an individual would compromise in some way on an issue of less immediate importance to their overall agenda with the understanding that their colleague would reciprocate the favor at some time in the future.

Other strategies for building relationships with government colleagues included deliberately sharing credit for successes, allowing others to influence and lead reforms, and championing reforms that benefited a wide variety of individuals and interests.

Leveraging International and Multi-stakeholder Partnerships:

Several individuals found great value in developing close relationships with the international community.

As one individual reflected:

> ***"There is a lack of local expertise in managing political transitions in most countries. So establishing technical alliances with international organizations can be of great help in having access to best practices, experience, and external support."***

International partners were credited for being valued contributors in developing national human rights instruments, strengthening government institutions, conducting anti-corruption investigations, and introducing policies related to women's rights, freedom of expression, open data, and public participation.

Some interviewees also found value in leveraging multi-sectoral or multi-stakeholder support to offset a lack of support among government colleagues. They developed coordination structures to broaden their engagement outside of formal political structures. A few noted, however, the importance of leveraging these relationships such that they do not threaten or alienate existing political forces within government.

Shifting Priorities

One of the most critical challenges related to crossing over is staying true to one's long-held democratic principles while navigating an array of structures, layers of accountability, and interests, and learning how to wield the political power of one's office. Although this was not the case with those interviewed for this survey, numerous examples exist of democratically minded individuals who enter government, some from civil society, setting aside their democratic principles to consolidate their own power and influence. All of the survey participants believed it was important to remain true to one's principles, and felt that their agendas in government served those principles throughout their time in office.

Survey participants recognized that negotiation and compromise with colleagues was essential for gaining influence and reaching agreements. They noted, however, that there is a danger that the public may perceive that one who has crossed into government has abandoned their principles even when they have not. This is of particular concern the longer one stays in office and makes a greater number of compromises over time. Therefore, a number of interviewees stressed the importance of understanding that serving in government is not permanent, and that one should not stay in office too long. Other interviewees said it was important for them to consult with civil society continuously while in office, and particularly when important compromises in government were necessary, to keep them informed about the reasons for their decisions and to avoid the perceptions that they have abandoned their principles.

Many Interviewees described instances in which circumstances in their countries changed, requiring them to shift their short-term priorities. On some occasions, interviewees were able to leverage an unexpected political development to consolidate support for a particular reform. On other occasions, changing circumstances resulted in a loss of momentum on particular reforms they championed. Therefore, some reflected on the importance of recognizing changing circumstances early and developing a strategy to manage or take advantage of change as it occurs.

In all cases, interviewees acknowledged that strong communications strategies that included purposeful narratives about their priorities and positions were central to the way in which their actions were perceived by citizens and colleagues. Those who found greatest success in managing their public image utilized popular media platforms to improvise quickly as current events unfolded in their countries.

The Pace to Reform

One key reflection of many interviewees was that it was difficult for them to come to terms with the reality that significant change in government takes a long time. Many of the interviewees recalled being frustrated with incremental reform, watered-down laws, and slow and/or weak implementation. In addition to this being personally aggravating, the slow pace of reform can lead to frustration among the general public and even a lack of belief that democratic reform will take hold and benefit their lives. Therefore, communication about reforms processes, including the goals, challenges, actions, and timelines, is important for setting reasonable expectations among citizens. Two key qualities of considerable value in government were patience and persistence.

One interviewee reflected that:

> ***"It is important to keep one's long-term objectives, like changing the culture of an institution, and not getting wrapped up in the short-term game.***

Women in Government

Most of the women interviewed for the survey said that gender identity was not a primary lens through which they viewed themselves with regard to their roles in government. However, they believed that most of their male counterparts in government viewed them as "women first," rather than professionals, colleagues, peers, or leaders. Every woman interviewed for the survey recalled challenges particular to being a woman in government ranging from receiving comments about their clothes and appearance, to feeling isolated because of their gender, to being harassed, discounted, or belittled. One advised young women who decide to cross over to government to recognize this challenge and confront it:

> ***"You are going to be called sweetheart and girl, but you have to speak out and correct the speaker, and say I have a name!"***

Another said:

> ***"You have valuable opinions. You have valuable networks. Let them respect that.***

Those interviewed sometimes felt that they had to work two to three times harder than their male counterparts to successfully advance their Agendas. Despite the hurdles they faced, however, many were able to accomplish goals while in government.

These include milestone achievements, such as reforming education policy, initiating anti-corruption investigations, ensuring security sector accountability, protecting human rights, reforming parliamentary procedures, drafting new constitutions, reaching peace agreements, passing women's rights legislation, and instituting environmental checks and balances. To achieve these outcomes, they often created alliances within or across parties.

Resources for Capacity Building

While some interviewees were able to take advantage of public administration or other relevant courses offered by their government, an academic institution, or civil society organizations, most said that having access to more and better capacity-building resources and management tools would have helped them achieve more in government. Interviewees said they could have benefited from tools to develop the following skills:

+ Creating a political base
+ Building coalitions
+ Understanding power structures
+ Finding opportunity in crisis
+ Communicating and messaging
+ Understanding public finance
+ Managing procurement processes
+ Managing change
+ Ensuring accountability
+ Building teams
+ Developing networks
+ Facilitating consultations
+ Leading collaborative processes
+ Conducting institutional capacity assessments
+ Raising funds
+ Drafting and promoting new legislation

Leaving Government

As noted above, several interviewees believed that one should understand that serving in government should not be permanent, and one should therefore return to civil society at some point. They said it was important to understand for oneself when the time was right to transition back into civil society. For some serving in appointed positions, they felt it necessary to leave government when they no longer felt their values agreed with those of the administration they were serving. For those in elected offices, some felt it necessary to leave government after an election, or after they came to believe that they would not be able to advance their agendas without making too many significant compromises.

One interviewee who served in a ministerial position recalled the importance of having a departure strategy that protected one's own integrity and that of the office he held. He knew that his relentless adherence to fiscal transparency in office had irritated colleagues who were accustomed to taking advantage of the privileges of their office for their personal benefit. He was concerned that after he left office, individuals in government might try to attack his reputation in order to diminish the expectation he tried to cultivate among citizens that the government be transparent and accountable. Therefore, he commissioned two separate audits of his office's financial records before leaving office and took other steps that would allow him to demonstrate that he had not corruptly used his position while in office. When he was indeed accused of corruption after leaving office, he was able to produce evidence of his efforts to be financially transparent and to account for resources he was responsible for as a Minister.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Those who participated in the survey came from a wide variety of backgrounds and played different roles in government, so it was natural that they measured success in their particular contexts differently. Success did not always mean "winning" to those surveyed. They viewed their success based on a combination of complex political, technical or social experiences that shaped the way in which they reached agreements and furthered their goals. However, the following commonalities emerged:

+ Small victories can be valuable. For example, adjusting an operational budget to respond to the needs of a new team or reforming an internal procedure to ease administrative burdens can have a big impact. Small victories demonstrate that change can be achieved and can address obstacles that stand in the way of more significant goals.
+ Building influence is critical. Interviewees occasionally had immediate legitimacy and influence as a newcomer in government. However, most felt that their political influence increased over time as they developed stronger relationships inside government. Some found that the more successful and reliable they were at delivering reform, and the more eager they were to share credit, the more quickly they gained influence.
+ The goal is to deliver democratic reform. In all cases, those surveyed acknowledged that success is ultimately defined by one's ability to deliver sound, meaningful, and lasting democratic reform. In some cases, reforms were sweeping, while in other cases reforms were incremental. Many interviewees reflected that some of their greatest and long lasting achievements in government involved improving processes and instituting accountability.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenges of governance are myriad. This survey does not attempt to provide comprehensive analysis of or advice for overcoming these challenges. The survey does share some of the more common, noteworthy, and salient challenges and successes those who crossed over from civil society to government experience. Most of the interviewees felt that crossing over from civil society to government following political transitions could contribute to advancing democratic reform. They reflected that crossover experiences depend greatly on the circumstances of each political transition, and the office in which one serves. Some were able to serve as a bridge between civil society and government, while others were able to leverage support from various sectors to advance reforms. While they mentioned successes, both small and large, they also reflected on strategies they used to overcome the challenges they experienced while in government.

Some found it challenging to maintain relationships with civil society or establish partnerships with government colleagues. Others struggled to build a team that allowed them to move agendas forward. Establishing relationships across all sectors were particularly important for those who crossed over. Women reflected that relationships and coalitions helped them overcome a lack of support within their parties or administrations. Women also commented on challenges that arose due to their gender, including working two to three times harder than their male counterparts.

Many acknowledged instances in which they felt they had to make compromises to their priorities, and to a lesser extent their agendas, in the short-term. Yet, no interviewee felt they had to make compromises to their values and principles. Compromising their priorities in the short-term sometimes allowed them to secure more support for their agendas in the long-term. Occasionally,

making compromises to their priorities slowed the realization of their reform goals. Therefore, interviewees reflected on the necessity of being patient and persistent given the slow pace of reform.

Individuals interested in crossing over would benefit from learning about the experiences of those who have gone before them, especially from contexts similar to their own. While there is a lack of resources to support individuals who cross over from civil society to government, lessons learned by others could significantly help. Additionally, multilateral and international organizations that promote democracy should consider ways to support those who cross over by providing them tools and helping them develop strategies to advance democratic reform.

Explore resources collected by the World Movement for Democracy's Crossover Initiative website, **https://www.movedemocracy.org/promoting-inclusive-governance/crossover-initiative**, which includes:

+ Videos and podcasts
+ Blog posts
+ Collected resources

Interested in sharing your experience? Contact the World Movement for Democracy at **world@ned.org**.

ABOUT THE WORLD MOVEMENT

The World Movement for Democracy is a global network of civil society activists, scholars, parliamentarians, thought leaders, journalists, and funders who are committed to advancing democracy.

Since 1999, we have facilitated networking among democracy supporters and convened discussions and workshops on democracy in different regions of the world. We actively empower the democracy movements to engage in cross-regional solidarity, as well as share knowledge, support, and strategies with one another.

The World Movement for Democracy welcomes all those who contribute to – and benefit from – communication with peers who face similar challenges while working to advance democracy. All networks, groups, and individuals who share the principles and values in our Founding Statement are welcome to join the World Movement for Democracy as participants.

The National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, DC serves as the Secretariat of the World Movement for Democracy.

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