## STRATEGIC ANALYSIS TOOLS – THE ENVIRONMENT

## ANALYZING THE POLITICAL SPACE AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUR ADVOCACY STRATEGY[1]

One of the strategic analyses that advocacy strategy planning teams often use is an assessment of the external environment and how open it is for advocacy work. This assessment is of great importance as it helps advocacy organizations and groups explicitly articulate and assess their political fears (risks) and hopes as a team before taking any serious actions.

An important advocacy dimension that groups should assess in the environment where they are working is the available political space. By political space we mean both the ability to express one's opinion about the prevailing political system and political leadership, and the availability of effective channels to influence the political system. Naturally, some political societies and systems are more open and tolerant to criticism than others. In some countries, for instance, it is acceptable to criticize the prime minister and cabinet ministers, than to criticize the president. In others, it is very sensitive to criticize prevailing ideologies, such as secularism in Turkey, or religious institutions, such as Al-Azhar in Egypt, or the Catholic Church in some Latin American countries. In addition, often it is much tougher to criticize the "Ministry of Defense", or the "intelligence agency" than to criticize many other authorities.

In terms of political space, we can divide countries into three main categories: closed, narrow, and open. The following table provides a brief comparison among the different political space (PS) categories:

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[1] Tadros, Nader; 2006. Advocacy Concepts And Practices Handbook: A Practical Guide to Advocacy Groups. People's Advocacy, Virginia, USA.
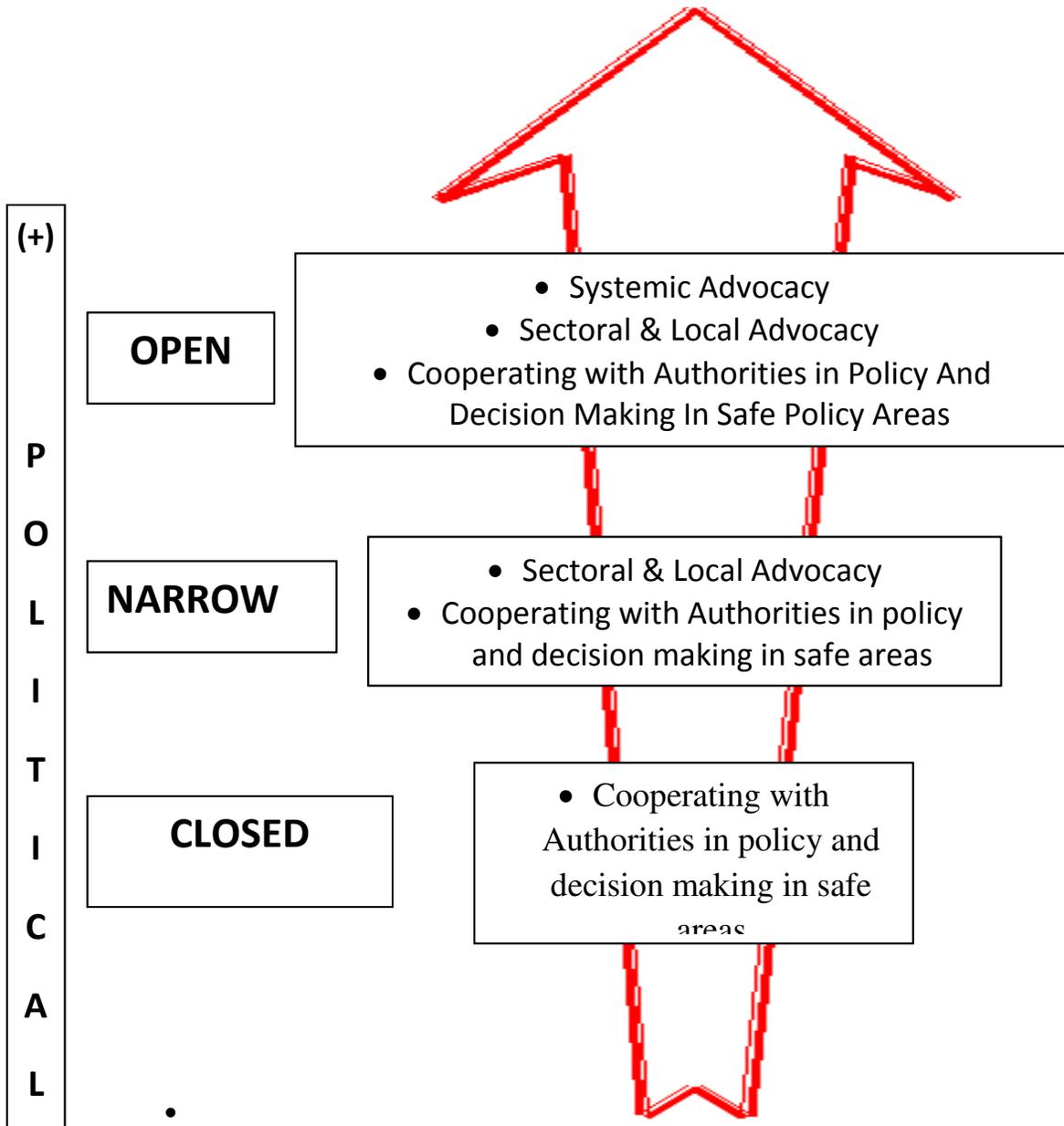
# POLITICAL SPACE (PS) ANALYSIS

| PS Category | Illustrative Characteristics | Advocacy Objectives | Advocacy Strategies |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Closed** (e.g. North Korea, Myanmar, Belarus & Syria.) | • Single party rule<br>• Disagreement with the government is punished<br>• Media is controlled by the state<br>• Interaction with foreigners is risky | Provide opportunities for citizens to participate in the decision-making processes in relatively safe areas that authorities support. | Cooperate with the authorities in making policies and systems, and providing services in areas accepted by authorities, such as getting ready for natural disasters, or organizing a campaign to address a health crisis, e.g. HIV/AIDS. |
| **Narrow** (e.g. Egypt, Thailand, and Iran.) | • Multi-party system<br>• One party prevails<br>• A mix of state-owned and private-owned media<br>• Citizens and media can criticize cabinet ministers and provincial governors<br>• Criticizing heads of state is risky and relatively rare | Build up ordinary people's self-confidence and ability to effectively participate in the policy making processes in several areas that are relatively safe, and establish the principles of participation, transparency and accountability in the decision-making processes. | Use legitimate different advocacy strategies, including cooperation with, and confronting authorities as much as people are willing to go. Focus will be on sectoral (health, education, housing, etc.) areas, and/or local areas (e.g. provincial and local levels.) |
| **Open** (e.g. France, India, and Canada) | • Multi-party system<br>• Parties rotate power<br>• Citizens and media can openly criticize the authorities and any official at any level including the head of state. | Exercise people's rights, especially marginalized and disadvantaged ones, in effectively participating in making and monitoring policies at all levels | Use all known legitimate and peaceful advocacy strategies that both broaden the space for participation of marginalized groups, and enhancing the democratic and just environment. |

The examples provided above are based on current available reports. Closed political space does not only exist at national levels. It sometimes exists in very traditional societies within a given country. Women, for instance, are often not allowed to participate in the decision making processes in many societies even if the national political space is narrow or, to go farther, an open one. Some reports came from Iraq that, even though the country is currently in a narrow or even open political space, women in some areas cannot participate in the decision making process at any level in their communities. When dealing with such cases, advocacy work should use the strategies that apply to this specific group. In the case of women in traditional societies, just encouraging women to address commonly accepted areas in which women can cooperate with the current leadership to address could count as an achievement.

Indicated strategies are only illustrative of what advocacy might do.  Some groups might still legitimately take some high-risk measures against closed or narrow political space environments if they accept to take such risks.

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# POLITICAL SPACE

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**P O L I T I C A L**

| OPEN |
|------|

- Systemic Advocacy
- Sectoral & Local Advocacy
- Cooperating with Authorities in Policy And Decision Making In Safe Policy Areas

| NARROW |
|--------|

- Sectoral & Local Advocacy
- Cooperating with Authorities in policy and decision making in safe areas

| CLOSED |
|--------|

- Cooperating with Authorities in policy and decision making in safe areas

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An important part of the advocacy strategy planning should help the organization(s) or groups determine the type of advocacy they need to engage in based on the assessment of the external environment in which they work.