



Civil unrest and Socio-political Changes: Changing role of Civil Societies.

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Abstract:

Civil Society is simultaneously a goal means to achieve, and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means. When the faces turn towards each other and integrate their different perspectives into a mutually supportive frame work, the idea of Civil Society can explain a great deal about the course of politics and social changes and serve as a practical framework for organizing both resistance and alternative solutions to social, economic and political problems.

Key words: Politics, voluntary, civil society

Introduction

The vocabulary of politics is today strewn with terms such as 'civil society', 'social movements', 'non-governmental organizations' (NGOs), 'non-profit associations' (NPAs), 'private voluntary organizations' (PVOs), 'independent advocacy groups' (IAGs), 'principled issue networks' (PINs), 'segmented polycentric ideologically integrated networks' (SPINs), and more. 'Civil society' is the oldest of these concepts, dating back to English political thought of the sixteenth century.^[1] The contemporary proliferation of broadly related terms perhaps in part reflects uncertainty, confusion and disagreement about the meaning of the older notion.

What, indeed, is civil society?

The concept has been understood very differently across different time periods, places, theoretical perspectives and political persuasions. Thus, for example, 'civil society' for Hegel, as an academic philosopher in Prussia and Baden in the early nineteenth century, has not been the same as 'civil society' for a grassroots eco-feminist group in India in the late twentieth century. We therefore need not a definitive definition, but a

notion of civil society that, with due regard for cultural and historical contexts, promotes insight and effective policy in the contemporary world.^[2]

We might begin by stressing what civil society is not. For one thing, civil society is not the state: it is non-official, non-governmental. Civil society groups are not formally part of the state apparatus; nor do they seek to gain control of state office. On this criterion political parties should probably be excluded from civil society, although some analysts do include party organisations (as distinct from individual party members who might occupy governmental positions). Other fuzzy cases arise in respect of non-official actors that are organised and/or funded by the state. At what point do such bodies cease to be 'non-governmental'? In addition, some agencies outside government help states and multilateral institutions to formulate, implement, monitor and enforce policies. To what extent can 'civil society' be involved in official regulatory functions? Clearly, the precise boundaries of 'non-governmental' activity are a matter for debate. Nevertheless, it is generally



agreed that civil society lies outside the 'public sector' of official governance.^[4]

Second, civil society is not the market: it is a non-commercial realm. Civil society bodies are not companies or parts of firms; nor do they seek to make profits. Thus the mass media, the leisure industry and cooperatives would, as business enterprises, not normally be considered part of civil society. To be sure, the distinction between the market and civil society is in practice sometimes far from absolute. For example, companies often organise and fund non-profit bodies, including foundations like Packard and Sasakawa that bear a corporate name. Meanwhile business lobbies like chambers of commerce and bankers' associations promote market interests even though these organisations themselves do not produce and exchange for profit. Many voluntary groups engage a salaried workforce in commercial activities like catalogue sales in order to fund their charitable operations. The environmentalist lobby Greenpeace has considered licensing its name as a brand.^[5] At what point does the market presence become so strong that an activity ceases to qualify as 'civil society'?

No doubt there are borderline cases, but it is generally agreed that civil society lies outside the 'private sector' of the market economy.

Establishing what civil society is not only partly establishes what it is. Thus far we have identified civil society as a 'third sector' that, while sometimes being closely related to, is distinct from the state and the market. Yet is this to say that any and all nongovernmental, non-commercial activity is part of civil society? Presumably we would not label, for example, the everyday routines of

households or idle chatter in a park as^[6] 'civil society'. Negative terminology like 'non-governmental organisation' and 'nonprofit body' is in this respect not very precise or helpful. What is the positive content of civil society?

Civil society encompasses enormous diversity. In terms of membership and constituencies, for example, it includes academic institutes, business associations, community-based organisations, consumer protection bodies, criminal syndicates, development cooperation groups, environmental campaigns, ethnic lobbies, foundations, farmers' groups, human rights advocates, labour unions, relief organisations, peace activists, professional bodies, religious institutions, women's networks, youth campaigns and more.^[7]

Political participation and civil society

Political participation in India has been transformed in many ways since the 1960s. New social groups have entered the political arena and begun to use their political resources to shape the political process. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, previously excluded from politics because of their position at the bottom of India's social hierarchy, have begun to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by India's democracy. Women and environmentalists constitute new political categories that transcend traditional distinctions. The spread of social movements and voluntary organizations has shown that despite the difficulties of India's political parties and state institutions, India's democratic tendency continues to thrive.



Beginning in the 1970s, activists began to form broad-based social movements, which proved powerful advocates for interests that they perceived as neglected by the state and political parties. Perhaps the most powerful has been the farmers' movement, which has organized hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in New Delhi and has pressured the government for higher prices on agricultural commodities and more investment in rural areas. Members of Scheduled Castes led by the Dalit Panthers have moved to rearticulate the identity of former Untouchables. Women from an array of diverse organizations now interact in conferences and exchange ideas in order to define and promote women's issues. Simultaneously, an environmental movement has developed that has attempted to compel the government to be more responsive to environmental concerns and has attempted to redefine the concept of "development" to include respect for indigenous cultures and environmental sustainability.^[8]

With its highly competitive elections, relatively independent judiciary, boisterous media, and thriving civil society, India continues to possess one of the most democratic political systems of all developing countries. Nevertheless, Indian democracy is under stress. Political power within the Indian state has become increasingly centralized at a time when India's civil society has become mobilized along lines that reflect the country's remarkable social diversity.

The unresponsiveness of India's political parties and government has encouraged the Indian public to mobilize through nongovernmental organizations and social movements.

The consequent development of India's civil society has made Indians less confident of the transformative power of the state and more confident of the power of the individual and local community. This development is shifting a larger share of the initiative for resolving India's social problems from the state to society. Fashioning party and state institutions that will accommodate the diverse interests that are now mobilized in Indian society is the major challenge confronting the Indian polity in the 1990s.^[9]

Civil society is not a colorless or odorless gas. Civil society is not an abstract academic concept anymore. Civil societies have colors and cultures, contexts and contours, gender and grounds, and politics and passion.

Civil society is plural. The theory and practice of civil society is plural in concept, genealogy, history, form, locations, content and politics. Its validity is partly due to this plurality at its conceptual core and the sheer diversity in its praxis. There is no single theory of civil society. And no single politics of civil society. This fluidity and fuzziness of the term is, paradoxically, what makes it significant. Civil society signifies diverse arenas and spaces of contested power relations. So the contradictions and contestations of power, culture and economy are reflected in the civil society discourse of a particular country or political context. Civil society has now become an arena of praxis wherein theory is continually negotiated and re-negotiated based on the evolving practice in multiple social, economic and cultural contexts.^[10]

The idea of civil society is used for political subversion, political reform as well as political transformation. Proponents of various



ideological streams from conservatism to neo-liberalism and from liberal reformists to radical socialists have been using the idea and practice of civil society to legitimize their respective political projects and programmes. This dynamism, pluralism and diversity to a large extent shape the emerging civil society discourse across the world. In South Asia, civil society may reflect the feudal and post-colonial tendencies within its own power spaces. In many countries of Africa, community differentiations based on tribal identities may influence and shape civil society discourse as well.^[11]

How civil society has changed the world?

After the long and interesting 20th century the world is faced with paradoxical occurrences the great fear of anti-globalists that there is only one, namely, the Western future, has sunken into oblivion after more and more people fight for their specific beliefs and ideas. There are many different ideologies fighting each other; some are struggling to save themselves from the tremendous force of liberal economy and representative democracy, are doing their best to tailor (adapt, modify) themselves in accordance with the so-called Western values. More and more peoples and nations all over the world are declaring independence, autonomy or sovereignty, and many of them get ready to take up arms and risk their lives and the lives of their compatriots to fight for the idea of the state, nation or country they believe in.^[12]

If we consider civil society discourse as a pluralist network of citizens and associational spaces for social and political action, then one can begin to appreciate the contribution of such discourse in shaping and

influencing the politics and policy processes in many countries and the world.

There are five specific areas where civil society discourse and initiatives have made very important political and social contributions. These are: a) women's rights b) ecological justice and environment protection c) human rights of ethnic, religious, race, and sexual minorities d) movements for citizens' participation and accountable governance and e) resistance and protest against unjust economic globalisation and unilateral militarisation. In fact, even in these specific areas there is a multiplicity of civil society discourse.^[13]

However, over the last 30 years, if women's rights and green politics are at the centre of all political and policy discourse, it is indeed due to the consistent mobilisation and advocacy by thousands of organisations and millions of people across the world. On February 15, 2003, more than 11 million people across the world marched against the war in Iraq and unilateral militarization. In fact, the unprecedented, coordinated global mobilisation happened on the same day largely due to digital mobilisation and partly due to the rather spontaneous coordination among social movements and civil society actors who met during the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2003.^[14]

In India too, in the last 25 years, most of the innovative policy framework and legislation happened due to consistent campaigning and advocacy by civil society organisations. It is the people-centred advocacy, campaigning and mobilization by hundreds of civil society organisations in India that prompted the Indian government to



enact the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Right to Education, the new Act to stop domestic violence, and the one aimed at protecting the land rights of tribal communities. It is due to the efforts of women's rights organisations and civil society initiatives that women's political participation and 33% reservation for women in Parliament are at the centre of political discourse in India.

In many countries of Asia and Africa, civil society activism has become a countervailing political force against authoritarian governments. It has also sought to challenge unjust economic globalisation. This was evident in the citizens' and civil society struggle against monarchy in Nepal and authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world. In many countries of Latin America, civil society became the common ground for diverse interest groups and political formations to act together to challenge authoritarian regimes. In fact, civil society played a key role in shaping the political process in Brazil, where social movements, progressive NGOs, progressive factions of the church, trade unions and public intellectuals came together for political and policy transformation. The World Social Forum process originated in Brazil partly due to these historical and political conditions, and it helped the transformation of state power in Brazil.^[15]

With the advent of the Internet, digital mobilisation and relatively cheap air travel there is an increasing interconnectedness between civil society initiatives and movements across the world. The unprecedented mobilisation and campaigns against the unjust WTO regime and for trade justice

and fair trade demonstrated the power of citizens' action and mobilisation beyond the state and market. The diverse range of mobilisation against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, Cancun, and Hong Kong influenced the political and policy choices of many countries and the G20 process. The Jubilee campaign for cancelling the unjust debt of poor countries attracted the support of millions of people both in rich and poor countries and in remote villages and megacities. The successful campaign against landmines proved to be another example of civil society mobilisation and action across the world. The World Social Forum emerged as an open space and platform for the exchange of ideas, coordination of action, and collective envisioning beyond narrow ideological and political divides. The emergence of a global justice solidarity movement influenced the political process in many countries in many ways.^[16]

Civil society and international relations:

In the last 15 years, there has been a resurgence of political consciousness in civil society. A whole range of new associations, citizens' formations, new social movements, knowledge-action networks and policy advocacy groups have emerged at the national and international level.

This was partly due to the shift in international politics in the aftermath of the Cold War and a consequent shift in the aid-architecture, with a stress on local ownership in the development process. The new stress on human rights in the aftermath of the Vienna Human Rights Summit, in 1993, gave new spaces and international legitimacy to new human rights movements, integrating civil, political,



economic, social and cultural rights. A series of United Nations conferences, starting with the Rio Summit in 1992, created an enabling global space for civil society processes and organisations. The Beijing Summit in 1995 on women's rights, the Copenhagen Summit on social development in 1996, and the Durban Summit on racism provided a global platform for civil society movements to advance a new discourse on politics and public policy. The exchange of knowledge, linkages and resources began to create a new synergy between countries and communities in the South as well as in the North. In fact, the United Nations became a key mediating ground between civil society and various governments.

There is a significant difference between the civil society discourse of the 1980s, 1990s and that of the last 10 years. Unless we understand and appreciate the multiple political shifts at the national and international levels, it might be difficult to understand the consequent shifts in the practice and theory of civil society. In the 1980s, civil society was more of a conceptual tool to legitimise and organise the protest movement against authoritarian governments in Latin America and Central Europe. In the 1990s, the term 'civil society' became an instrument of policy and politics at the international level, supported by both aid and trade. And in the last 10 years, the idea of civil society has been increasingly contextualised to become a plural arena of political praxis for transformative politics in multiple contexts. The old civil society discourse was submerged in new movements for radical democratisation, feminist politics, and ecological, social and economic justice. It is the new emerging discourse on civil society that seeks to address the issue of

democratic deficit, and crisis of governance.^[18]

So it is important to reclaim civil societies -- as plural and diverse spaces for collective human action -- as an arena for transformative politics. The reclaiming of civil societies would mean a reassertion of the dignity, sovereignty and human rights of all peoples. The ethics and politics of the idea of civil society need to be reclaimed to humanise the state, market and the political process. There is the need to reclaim a new political consciousness driven by freedom -- freedom from fear and freedom from want; freedom of association and freedom of beliefs. The idea of civil society needs to be reinforced by new civil values and virtues: the values of equality and justice; values that would help us fight all kinds of injustice and discrimination -- based on gender, race, caste or creed. Civil society can be transformative when it combines the politics of protest and the politics of proposal. Civil society will become an arena that can help combine the politics of people and the politics of knowledge. Civil society becomes a transformative space when it can help to create the politics of dissent, politics of association and citizens' action against monopoly of power and spaces for counter-discourse and counter-hegemony.^[19]

Civil society can make important contributions to a democratisation of global governance. Civic associations can advance public education, provide platforms, fuel debate, increase transparency and accountability, and enhance the democratic legitimacy of governance arrangements. Of course civil society does not provide a complete answer to democratic deficits in global regulation.



Improvements require not only quality inputs from civic elements, but also the will and capacity for change in official quarters and market circles. However, positive interventions from adequately resourced and suitably participatory and accountable civil society can infuse global governance with greater democracy. But we must retain caution. As we have seen, the promises of civil society for democratic global governance are not realised automatically, and these activities also carry potential dangers for democracy. Civil society can pursue anti-democratic goals, employ antidemocratic means, and produce anti-democratic consequences. These risks are by no means grounds to exclude civil society, but they give reason to treat it with care. So we want neither romanticisation nor demonisation of civil society as a force in global politics. A sober assessment of the record to date and the possibilities for the future should help us to achieve the greatest democratic returns from civil society mobilisation on questions of globalisation.^[20]

The relative failure of the Indian state created feelings of exclusion amongst large segments of the population, and allegations that the state is not neutral, but biased on the basis of class and caste interests. These alleged biases have in turn created sentiments of apathy and also facilitated negative mobilisation and manipulation of various primordial identities such as ethnicity, religion and caste. This segmentation of Indian society has had ambiguous consequences and has led to demands and actions which have seriously undermined the democratic system by the

Conclusion:

To conclude, Civil Society is simultaneously a goal means to achieve, and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means. When the faces turn towards each other and integrate their different perspectives into a mutually supportive frame work, the idea of Civil Society can explain a great deal about the course of politics and social changes and serve as a practical framework for organizing both resistance and alternative solutions to social, economic and political problems.

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