



Civil Society in the Third World: Reality or Hoax?

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Abstract

‘Civil society’ has become a very fashionable term in social science jargons. It is a legal and political space in which individuals interact with others, sometimes in groups, but retain their own identity and interests. Civil society in the third world is a product of particular history, frontiers, culture and socio-economic structures. Its functions and scope vary from society to society and it exists in both democratic and non-democratic societies. This paper makes a very humble attempt to understand the nature and scope of civil society in the third world in the backdrop of globalization.

Keywords: Civil Society; Third World; Globalization; NGOs; Democracy; Global

1. Introduction

‘Civil society’ has become a very fashionable term in social science jargons. It has emerged in recent years as one of the key concepts in the study of comparative politics. Civil society is a concept that fails to draw any specific parameters. It is not simply an extra governmental space, but something more than that. It is, in fact, a complex form of society of societies, larger than any individual actor or organization. In political science, the term ‘civil society’ refers to non-governmental structures and activities that comprise individuals, households, non-profit and non-governmental organizations, social movements, linguistic communities and cultural identities at the global level. It is a legal and political space in which individuals interact with others, sometimes in groups, but retain their own identity and interests.

2. Review of Literature

The book entitled: “Civil Society: History and Possibilities” edited by Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (2001) analyses the meaning of civil society in different theoretical traditions of Western philosophy. The paper contributors focus on the theoretical and practical contexts in which the notion of civil society has been invoked in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The book addresses how an influential Western idea like civil society is altered/modified by the specific contexts of intellectual and practical life in the societies of the South.

Another important book “Civil Society” authored by Michael Edwards, published in 2009 (second edition) attempts to explain how in future the pressure of state authority, resurgent individualism, and forces of nationalism as well as fundamentalism will re-shape the practice of citizens’ action in both positive and negative ways. In this backdrop, the author discusses the role

of civil society in deepening democracy, re-building community, and addressing poverty, inequality and injustice.

Ernest Gellner in one of his books on “Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals” (1996) shows that the fundamental difference between communism and western liberalism is the existence of the civil society that bridges the gap between the family and the state. He argues that in liberal democracy civil society thrives for a variety of reasons.

Howard Wiarda’s book entitled “Civil Society: The American Model and Third World Development” (2003) examines case studies from sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and shows the variations in respect of the importance of civil society. The author makes a contrasting study regarding the role of civil society in the United States and Third World.

After making a literature survey, the author opines that most of the book available on the subject focuses on the concept of civil society and its importance on the ground with special emphasis on the West. The present article makes a very humble attempt to assess the nature, scope and status of civil society in the third world in the backdrop of globalisation.

3. Concept of Civil Society

There is no consensus as what constitutes civil society. Social scientists have looked at the concept from different perspectives. It is a space that exists between family and the state. Prof. Ernest Gellner pointed out that the concept of civil society had ‘no living resonance or evocativeness’ until the mid-eighties. It was distinctly ‘covered in dust’. Civil society then emerged as a highly valued tool of political analysis. Gellner noted that what the term civil society denoted was absent in extensive parts of the world, including Asia. He wrote: ‘The absence was felt acutely in societies which had strongly centralized all aspects of life and where a single political economic ideological hierarchy tolerated no rivals --- this caused the rest of society to approximate an atomized condition, and dissent then become a work of heresy---’. (Gellner: 68). It may be added that Gellner was actually speaking about the socialist countries of East Europe, but his observations, by and large, approximate the political conditions in several parts of Asia which lack the participatory democracy that allows some space for the development of civil society. Goran Hyden and his associates state that civil society is made up of associational life that reflects the extent to which citizens share their personal grievances and demands with others. It is the arena where the private becomes public and the social becomes political. It is also a space where values are formed and expressed and interests are articulated in public. (Hyden: 2-3)

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time and date when civil society emerged in the society. On the whole, the origin of civil society could be traced back to the period when modern ideas of democracy were beginning to take root. The period also coincides with the rise of capitalism and the evolution of modern state system.

Civil society occupies a very important position in the field of western political thought and practice. However, meaning and implications of civil society have varied enormously over time, in different historical contexts and from country to country. In recent times civil society puts

emphasis on the freedom of association, liberty, pluralist politics, market economies and so on. (Wiarda: 23). It has relevance in many third world countries with their quite different histories, cultures, societies, economies and political traditions.

Civil society is a post-Hegelian concept. It is a much older term – its reference could be found even in the study of Aristotle.¹ However, in its original sense, it did not focus on any distinction between ‘state’ and ‘society’ or between political and civil society. It simply meant a community. To Hobbes, civil society was not “natural” but an artificial creation of the state. The state shaped, organized and even manufactured civil society as it deemed fit. In Hobbes’s state of nature, this state organized system of civil society provided a way to ensure peace and security. John Locke, in contrast, argued that civil society was voluntary, individualistic and participatory, not created or manipulated by the state. The basis of civil society was constituted by private property, the rule of law and democratic participation. Civil society thus meant citizens living together in a condition of protected property rights providing for economic prosperity and political freedom guaranteed by the rule of law. (ibid: 17-18).

According to Hyden, beginning with Locke, the state arose from society and it was necessary to restrain conflict between individuals. The state could not be given unlimited sovereignty because that would pose a threat to individual freedoms derived from natural law. Thus, there must be a social contract between rulers and the ruled that guaranteed these rights and gave the state the authority to protect civil society from destructive conflict. (Hyden: 4-5) Thus, a constitutional arrangement between state and civil society became the cornerstone of liberal democracy.

Thomas Paine, however, took a different position that was considerably more anti-statist. Any expansion of state power, according to him, posed a threat to the liberties that kept civil society alive. He argued that it was the market rather than the state that allowed civil society to expand. This was possible only when individuals were free to exercise their natural rights. (Hyden: 4-5) In other words, civil society was formed voluntarily to put a cap on absolute rule and to preserve liberty and order. Montesquieu stood for a balanced constitution, separation of powers and limits on royal absolutism. Rousseau on the other hand was hardly interested in the processes of and institutions of government. He was of the view that independent civil society would constitute a limit on the general will.

It is interesting to note is that the German tradition of civil society was very different from the English or the French. In German tradition there is a powerful emphasis on law and order, which also required a strong state. It was Hegel who for the first time bi-furcated the concept; whereby civil society became distinct from the family and the state. (Khilnani: 17-18). M. B. Nisal, states that the concept of civil society remains intensely contested. Civil society, according to Nisal refers to “the space in a given society that exists between the family level and the state level.” (Nisal: 2). Informal associations or activities help in forming civil society. The village panchayat, river in the village or a pond is the place where people discuss about school teachers, landlords and village politics, about children, relatives, local government and even on national politics. Individuals connect with others and talk about matter of public relevance without the interference or sponsorship of the state. Nisal rightly states that cities tend to have formal associations, but villages hold informal meetings. (ibid: 3).

Civil society in the Hegelian, Marxian and Gramscian tradition has one thing in common i.e. it refers to the sphere of social life that falls outside the state, though all of them do not see it as necessarily free from state interference. Civil society, in other words, is seen as the site at which most interactions between the state and society take place. This is the site at which society enters into a relationship with the state. (Mohan: 194).

The concept of civil society gained importance in the 1980s as an attempt to establish civility in society. Civil society in due course came to be seen as a 'space' where groups could exist and interact with each other in order to ensure better conditions of existence. Thus, civil society is both a 'social value and a set of social institutions.' (ibid: 193).

Scholars agree on the fact that most important institutional component of civil society comprises voluntary groups of different types. These include community groups, cooperatives, unions, associations, self-help groups, social service agencies etc. Civil society, therefore, according to Sudha Mohan, is a pluralized concept. It revolves around mainly three basic elements: the state, private enterprise and civil society. (ibid: 194). This has been represented by the prince, the merchant and the citizen.

In the present context, civil society is an unfinished agenda that consists of sometimes thick, sometimes thinly stretched networks of socio-economic and cultural institutions and actors which organize themselves across borders with the aim of drawing the world together in different ways. It is a unique state of affairs in which thousands and millions of people actively participate, cutting across state boundary, sometimes harmoniously through cooperation/compromise and sometimes conflictual. Needless to add that civil society in the global context is called the 'global civil society' which is further a complex form of civil society. As John Keane rightly puts it, 'Global civil society is the most complex society in the history of human species.'

4. Global Civil Society

The concept of global civil society has become widely relevant in the backdrop of globalization, global governance and with the spread of liberal democratic values. Global civil society has played an important role in transforming the nature of world politics in a number of ways. It has been represented by voluntary groups, multicultural institutions and non-governmental organizations² (NGOs), which have generated tremendous influences of the world political system. Global civil society presented its public face in massive demonstrations in countries around the world. It is a response of rising concerns about the need for a new social, economic and political environment at the global level. The most dramatic manifestation of global civil society was noticed in the Seattle environmental summit in 1999. About 700 organizations, 40,000 students, workers, NGOs and religious groups participated in the 'battle for Seattle'. Global civil society has emerged to resist an assault on life and democracy by the institutions of corporate globalization. It gained public visibility primarily as a popular resistance movement challenging the institutions and policies of corporate globalization. According to David C Korten et al. 'Global civil society emerged as an expression of the love of life, freedom, community, and democracy that resides deep in the soul of every human being.'

Global civil society includes multiple forms of association such as new social movements, international federation of churches, professional and business associations, non-governmental organizations that are oriented towards the global arena etc. The guiding purpose of global civil society is not to capture power by replacing the present regime in an inherently violent and unjust system. Nor is it to advance or impose an ideological agenda. The people of global civil society believe in the sacred unity of the whole of life and the essential goodness and potential of each person to function as a responsible citizen mindful of the needs of the whole. The people of global civil society value life, democracy, freedom, justice, cooperation, active citizenship, spirit, and the nonviolent resolution of conflict. They seek a society that honors and nurtures these values and the means they employ must be consistent with these values. (Keane: 8-9). It comprises bodies like Amnesty International, the International Red Cross, independent media, internet groups, employers' federation etc.

Global civil society is therefore the sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organizations, networks and individuals that are based upon civility. It is located between the family, the state, and the market. Global civil society, in other words, operates beyond the confines of national societies, politics, and economics. (Jordan: 94-95)

5. Civil Society-Democracy Interface

At the theoretical level, a closer proximity has been established between 'civil society' and 'democracy'. They are not only interdependent in nature but complimentary as well. Democracy strengthens civil society and vice versa. However, it is important to bear in mind that a 'façade' democracy does not necessarily promote a healthy civil society. In theoretical terms, a facade democracy does not engender a strong and functional framework of 'elite-mass linkage'. The lack of elite mass linkage not only prevents the development of sociopolitical dialogue but also encourages the formation of traditionalist-conservative alliance. The façade democracy is invariably static and fragile and it obviously creates wide ranging instability and insecurity for itself and for its neighbours. Therefore, the key problem for most of the countries in Asia and Africa is the absence of linkage between the people at large and their government. Consequently, the formation of a healthy civil society has been held in check and at the same time democratic values are yet to find strong roots. In most cases, the minority elites have compromised with the emergence of peoples' democracy.

According to George Soros, 'Perhaps the greatest threat to freedom and democracy in the world today comes from the formation of unholy alliances between government and business. This is not a new phenomenon. It used to be called fascism...The outward appearances of the democratic process are observed, but the powers of the state are diverted to the benefits of private interests.' The incumbent political elites have built authoritarian model of façade democracy, eliminating nearly all means for the popular will to be expressed through political pluralism. The self-absorbed elites have thus created a political and social environment which fosters social tensions and conflicts. Consequently, the neglected people resort to coercive means. The end result is popular discontent, leading to radical and underground guerilla movement.

6. Third World Civil Society

Third world societies in general are characterized by corporatist and authoritarian regimes; though few countries have adopted the pluralist model of democracy. Corporatism³ means state regulation and state control of interest groups/NGO activity and the creation of state-managed associational life. Corporatism, according to Wiarda, may be defined as “a system of social and political organization in which the state controls, limits, sometimes monopolizes, even creates the interest-group life or ‘civil society’ that swirls about it.” (Wiarda: 28). Liberalism, in contrast, means a system of free and uncontrolled association of people, pluralism and largely unregulated interest groups or NGO activity. Civil society plays a very meaningful role in this system.

Corporatism, through its state control mechanism, helped maintain order, stability, unity and social peace in many third world countries characterized by potential for disorder, instability, fragmentation and social conflict. It promoted economic growth without encouraging social pluralism and demands for democracy. Thus, corporatism enabled elite groups to remain in power and to control and regulate the system in its own vested interests. This apart one most important thing to be noted about corporatism is that it was adaptive in nature. It enabled a modernizing regime to adjust slowly to change without generating instability or upheaval in many third world countries. (ibid: 34). In the process corporatism became enormously attractive throughout the third world.

Wiarda very rightly pointed out that under corporatism an elaborate system of rules and regulations was established governing trade union activities. The union members were required to disclose their membership lists, financing, leadership and other details. Trade union groups were required to apply for recognition from the rulers. Such recognitions were denied in many cases. To avoid any imminent chaos, the restrictive corporatist laws were enforced against the trade union activities. What is more important and noteworthy is that the regime in power consciously used the corporatist laws to divide the labour movement. It used to provide benefits to the likeminded trade union members and peasants, who in return would accept the legal restrictions imposed by the regimes. Thus, there were, according to Wiarda, both ‘co-optive and coercive’ aspects of pluralism, both carrot and sticks. (ibid: 35). People supported this system because it provided limited benefits to them which were far better than total authoritarianism and full dictatorial controls. It was considered as important step to promote democracy and good governance. South Korea and Taiwan in the 1980s were good examples of this transition from authoritarian corporatism to more pluralist corporatism. Political elites in these third world countries often supported these regimes keeping some corporatist control in place to further their political and economic interests. These elites created ‘civil society’ organizations of their own; which is why civil society in much of the third world is still and elite, upper/middle class phenomenon. (ibid: 36). From this perspective, civil society groups in the third world are still in its infancy.

In the backdrop of globalization, economies of many third world countries are being gradually deregulated. Authoritarianism is giving way to democracy, Egypt being the latest example. Numerous societies and political systems are being transformed from corporatism to free association and greater societal and political pluralism. In some countries the process is still incomplete and partial. Civil society is yet to take its proper shape. There are still limits on NGO activities. Many governments, while dismantling corporatism formally at the national level, are

practicing the same at the local level. (ibid: 3-4). Third world societies are therefore at different levels in respect of the formation of civil society. If democracy is to flourish in these societies, genuine social and political pluralism and civil society must be encouraged and nurtured.

Civil society agencies – in order to be effective in the third world societies – need to understand the context in which they are operating. They should be prepared to implement their programmes taking into account the local/national or regional conditions. Past instances show that various reform programmes aimed at third world failed adapt to the social, political and cultural conditions in which they found themselves. Agrarian reform, community development, family planning, judicial reforms are few such examples. (ibid: 5). In most of the cases, the NGOs/civil society face difficulties to implement their programmes because of state controls or by the reluctance of political leaders to go forward. This apart, Wiarda points out that some NGOs have been booted out of the countries in which they were operating; others have been forced to curtail their activities for different reasons. In order to function effectively, NGOs must assess how far or how much freedoms the governments in the third world countries - fearing unrest and instability – would to allow them (NGOs/civil society) to function effectively. Therefore, the NGOs must remain careful while operating in this part of the world.

In the last two decades, there has been worldwide explosion of civil society, NGOs and private interest groups in general. This apart, many developing nations in recent years have reformed, privatized and followed neo-liberal economic policies. Some countries are, however, reluctant to introduce political reforms, while going ahead with economic reforms. China is the most important example in this case. Beijing started economic reforms since late 1970s in a very systematic and scrupulous manner without disturbing the regimented party system. Given this situation the NGO/civil society groups find it difficult to operate smoothly.

Theoretically speaking, there are three main paths to development: authoritarian path, liberal-pluralist path and Marxist-Leninist path. (ibid: 7). Authoritarianism has vanquished in many third world countries in the backdrop of globalization. With the end of cold war, the Marxist-Leninist ideology discredited and it was assumed that liberalism and pluralism will triumph universally, which is not the case. Therefore, the civil society roots are yet to be very strong in the third world.

In the Asian context, Prof. R. R. Sharma has drawn a very uneasy democracy-civil society linkage. According to him, in West Asia as well as in Central Asia, the political elites do not pretend to have any democratic ambition. It has consciously stalled or backtracked democratic political reform. Likewise, South East Asia until the mid-nineties, in the words of Emerson, remained ‘world’s most recalcitrant’ region. It waded off all kinds of pressure for democratization. Myanmar is stuck into military regime. Indonesia and Philippines had to live under the dictatorship of Suharto and Marcos for a long period. Both Malaysia and Singapore prefer a single party system. The whole of Indo-China had similar regimes. Thailand is also deficient in strong democratic institutions. Similarly, in recent years, South Asian countries (except India) are also hopping between democracy and monarchy / military rule. In other words, by and large, the Asian states may be characterized as fragile democracies. (Sharma: ‘Introduction’: 12-28). It is thus obvious that the emerging fledgling democracies in Asia have yet to create strong democratic institutions and a healthy civil society.

Civil society, in fact, emerged as a major social force in Russia⁴ in the final decades of the twentieth century. It can be measured by qualitative development of public and associational life. The enormous development of NGO sector in Russia reflects a strong current of civic activism, with some 400,000 registered in 2001, rising to half a million in 2006. Richard Sakwa argues that if measured more qualitatively in terms of the autonomy of social actors, their ability to intervene effectively in decision making process to mobilize public opinion in a way that can change the approach of public authorities and indeed the ability of civil society to modify traditional notions of public order to ensure the impartial application of law, then civil society in Russia is found wanting. (Sakwa: 167-168). According to Vladimir Putin, "...Civil society should have its own foundations, it should feed the spirit of freedom..." (ibid: 168-169).

Communist systems in Russia overextended the legal jurisdiction and effective control of state institutions over all spheres of social life. Left scholars found the term 'civil society' of little interest. 'Civil society' was identified with bourgeois society, inextricably linked with the productive base of capitalist society. Members of the Frankfurt school viewed the concept as "...a prism through which the contradictions and conflicts of capitalism were refracted." (Khilnani: 15-16). Herbert Marcuse in his study of *Soviet Marxism* did not use the term 'civil society'. (ibid). After the collapse of communist models in these states, there was a need for the growth of civil society outside the jurisdiction of the state. (Kaviraj: 1-2).

It was assumed that since the communist ideology has been discredited in recent times and authoritarianism in many countries undermined, democratic, pluralist, civil society will grow naturally. But it has not happened. In fact, the issues and processes are not so simple. The process is not necessarily inevitable or universal. Wiarda has rightly pointed out: "There are many gaps, glitches, overlaps of traditional and modern, and halfway houses between corporatism and free associability. The Tocquevillian model of multiple, laissez-faire associability that is at the heart of American political and public life does not apply, or applies only partially and in mixed form, in much of the Third World." (Wiarda: 5).

China's economy is the world's second most powerful; and its political system is stable and functional. Yet civil society in China is very weak compared to the developed and democratic countries. Under strong, centralized, bureaucratic government, China has achieved remarkable economic growth rates over the years which deserve appreciation. With deeper economic liberalization and negligible political reforms, such as the introduction of election of government leaders at the village and parish levels, China will have to travel a long distance when it comes to the question of development of civil society. Therefore, economic growth, development and stability of the political system cannot be the proper indicator of civil society advancement. India, in contrast, has a strong civil society and its economic performance has been outstanding. At the same time, caste-based associations play a very predominant role in India.

A great debate is on in respect of the status of civil society in the Muslim world. The debate is mainly centered on whether Islam and democracy are compatible. The moot point is that in *Koran* or in *Shariah* there is no categorical opposition to democracy or civil society. In many parts of Africa, democracy, social structure and political systems are all under serious threat and civil society is yet to emerge as a potent force. Civil society is largely found in ethnic or tribal

groups. Latin America on the other hand confronts a most complex situation. According to Wiarda, in Latin America, there is “an incredible mix, jumble, and perhaps dysfunctional hodgepodge of earlier Christian, Thomistic conceptions of civil society, Enlightenment and ‘rationalist’ Rousseauian forms, and statist and corporatist forms, coupled with nascently American-style pluralism.” (ibid: 22-23).

Sunil Khilnani argues that the even in the West, in the early post-Second World War decades, the concept of civil society did not receive much attention. ‘Civil society’ was not focused in the arguments of liberal political theorists like Isaiah Berlin or Karl Popper, defenders of liberal values and of individual liberty. Despite the fact that they portrayed the dangers of ‘absolute politics’; the need to invoke the idea of civil society was not felt. (Khilnani: 15-16).

7. Conclusion

Civil society is ambiguous concept. Its meaning has varied over time and space. In other words, civil society is time and culture specific. Sometimes, it is also country specific. Civil society model of one country cannot be imposed or applied to another country. It develops from within, not outside the state. The concept of civil society is therefore not necessarily universal: it is a product of particular history, frontiers, culture and socio-economic structures. It exists in both liberal-democratic and other societies in varied forms. Even in the third world, the state of civil society has not been uniform. Wiarda rightly pointed out that civil society cannot be effectively exported to other nations and cultures whose histories and traditions are fundamentally different from others.

With the declining of relevance Marxist-Leninist model in the twentieth century, in the backdrop of globalization, the concept of ‘global civil society’ has gained new momentum. People are organizing to address issues that concern them in multiple political arena-local, national and international. It would however be a grave mistake to conclude that cross-border activism represents a genuine sense of global community. Keeping in mind the diverse patterns of socio-economic-political systems in the third world, the functions and role of civil society is bound to vary. In other words, the origin and growth of a single uniform model of civil society in the third world is a distant dream.

Notes

1. For the ancient Greeks, civil society was conceived as a commonwealth of the politically organized citizens. Within this commonwealth, the “civil” part of civil society referred to the requirements of citizenship – knowledge, discourse, participation. In Plato’s conception, civil society was subordinated to state authority. Aristotle, in contrast, recognized that life takes place at multiple associational or pluralist levels. Then under Roman Empire, statist corporatism came into existence. (Corporatism means a system of state-sponsored, state-controlled and state organized associations.) Following the fall of Rome, throughout the middle ages, Christianity provided the main categories of social and political life. There are however basic differences within Christianity regarding civil society. (Wiarda: 14-15).

2. NGOs do not represent a well-knit community; they comprise a broad spectrum of diverse groups with varied activities and ideologies. Their modus operandi mainly involves three (Short: 270) strategies: (a) *Persuasive Strategies* – these involve the bringing of an issue to the attention of authorities, through collection and presentation of information on the one hand and petitions on the other; (b) *Collaborative strategies* – these involve open encounters with the authorities through lobbying of local governmental offices, departments and other decision making bodies; and (c) *Confrontational strategies* – these take the form of rallies, marches and morchas.
3. The concept of corporatism has a long tradition in Western political theory. Like civil society corporatism has its origins in the ancient world of Greece and Rome. Corporatism is present in its pluralist, democratic, participatory and societal form in Europe, Japan and North America. Corporatist regimes in one form or another came to power throughout Europe, in Italy, Portugal, Spain, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Estonia, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Belgium and France for varying lengths of time. It is also prevalent in the Third World, particularly in East and South East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Many countries, while repudiating corporatism ideologically, nevertheless continued to practice a disguised form of corporatism.
4. From geographical point of view a major part of Russia fall in the Asian territory. Hence, Russia is considered as Asian power. In international relations, however, Russia is known as Eurasian power.

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