

POVERTY OF OUR CIVIL SOCIETY

Or

Deterioration of Civil Society in Pakistan

Outline

- ❖ Introduction
- ❖ Role of civil society
- ❖ Civil society & failure in restraining authoritarianism
- ❖ Misperceived notion of “citizenship”
- ❖ Frustration of poor masses
- ❖ Militarism – another political paralyses
- ❖ Incredibility of civil society organisations
- ❖ Civil society actually an uncivil society in Pakistan
- ❖ Political government – still a solution to all problems

Essay

Civil society is composed of the totality of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the force-backed structures of a state (regardless of that state's political system) and commercial institutions. The literature on links between civil society and democracy have their root in early liberal writings like those of Alexis de Tocqueville. However they were developed in significant ways by 20th century theorists like Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who identified the role of civil society in a democratic order as vital.

They argued that the political element of many civil society organizations facilitates better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable as a result. The statutes of these organizations have often been considered micro-constitutions because

they accustom participants to the formalities of democratic decision making.

More recently, Robert D. Putnam has argued that even non-political organizations in civil society are vital for democracy. This is because they build social capital, trust and shared values, which are transferred into the political sphere and help to hold society together, facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and interests within it.

Others, however, have questioned how democratic civil society actually is. Some have noted that the civil society actors have now obtained a remarkable amount of political power without anyone directly electing or appointing them. Finally, other scholars have argued that, since the concept of civil society is closely related to democracy and representation, it should in turn be linked with ideas of nationality and nationalism.

Civil society promotes democracy, so goes the prevailing orthodoxy in the mostly western literature on democratization in emerging democracies like Pakistan.

Inspired in large part by the post-1990 triumph of liberal democracy in large swathes of the globe, this fantastic creation also informs much of the current thinking in development policy given its presumed utility both as an analytical concept and as an instrument of change.

Romanticized as an autonomous sphere of associational activity constituted by disparate societal groups, bonded together by the common passion of collective action, civil society is assumed to be selflessly engaged in negotiating and claiming what is rightfully the citizens' political, economic and social prerogatives from state. Thus civil society generates "social capital" and inculcates a general sense of 'publicness' that in turn makes government responsive and accountable to it.

Civil society ideologues in Pakistan too believe in the innate ability of this elusive conceptual construction as a democratic catalyst. If that is indeed the case, why does experience in Pakistan, as elsewhere in the developing world, present a grim picture of the prospects of civil society creating democracy (in fact, quite the reverse may be true). More specifically, why has this supposedly democratically oriented "civil society" failed in restraining authoritarianism, both civil and military, in Pakistan? In other words, why has it not championed the cause of political democracy?

First and foremost, imagining civil society as an autonomous sphere in direct opposition to state is not very helpful in explaining its political failure in Pakistan. At the cost of privileging the modern/tradition dichotomy, it can be claimed that the concept of 'citizenship,' as understood in the West, is still alien to a large majority of the Pakistani

public. Primary attachments such as tribe, culture, and language remain powerful markers of identity given the unmitigated failure of state in managing diverse ethnic, social and political claims on it.

Naturally, where access to state is controlled, private interests are bound to take precedence over the public good. People frustrated with a state that excludes them as citizens, are forced to withdraw from the public sphere and ultimately jockey for state resources and access via these primordial loyalties.

No less importantly, a large majority of the public is still dependent on, and derives financial and social power from, state. Government employment and contracts constitute the biggest sources of economic security in the country. Professional associations, such as academia and trade unions, too are beholden to state for economic survival.

This nascent and dependent civil society is thus intrinsically mingled in state. Decades of pervasive authoritarian rule too have clearly undermined the emergence of a politically vibrant civil society. Besides eroding civilian authority and capacity to govern the country, the militarization of state and society has embedded a collective intellectual and political paralysis on our social psyche.

Civil society organizations (CSOs), touted as the most effective avatar of civil society, are also a classic example of an experiment gone wrong. With their portfolios determined largely by shifting donor fads, they have conveniently given short shrift to the macro-institutional context in which their development efforts are likely to have a lasting impact. Today, the non-governmental sector faces an acute crisis of credibility amidst increasing public and official allegations of mismanagement and corruption.

This is not to belittle the invaluable role of some NGOs in critical social areas where the state has miserably failed. But to point to the collective failure of the NGOs to move beyond mere service delivery functions to real social political empowerment of their "beneficiaries."

Other sporadic civil society challenges to state have come from remote and weak groups like *kachchi abadi* residents, fisher folk and others, who are driven, and understandably so, by their inherently localized problems. Professional groups like the bar associations too remain quite particularistic in their demands on the state, ostensibly fearing persecution.

In other words, 'civil society' in Pakistan is at best an 'uncivil' extension of the state, with the large NGOized chunk atomized and stripped of its political role by aid-driven development. Where then should one turn for answers to Pakistan's growing crisis of governability?

The answer lies in a strong and rejuvenated political society. Contrary to the popular anti-politics myths churned out incessantly by the

military regime and the country's "garrison" intelligentsia, politics can still control, manage and reverse Pakistan's complex governance problems rooted in ethnic conflict, widespread social disparities, rampant poverty and systemic corruption. Representative politics is a cohesive force, mediating a diverse array of often conflicting societal interests to avert open conflict.

Political parties, essential to any democratic political order, play the role of a bridge between civil society and state; a role political scientists compare to "amphibians:" their existence in both spheres, connecting one to the other. Parties translate public demands into laws and rules, and above all, make government answerable to the electorate. A politically inclined 'civil society' clearly needs their integrative influence to help it break free from the corrosive vestiges of both authoritarian state control and its own structural coma.

For instance, micro-credit must be seen as a first step in empowering the "beneficiaries" to stake a claim for their due rights and seek integration in the formal economy, yet there is hardly any recognition in the NGO community or external donors that this is even required, let alone the acknowledgement that it cannot be done without linkage to a political process.

If our history is any guide, Pakistan's governance problems are too complex to lend themselves to the magic of the martial stick. Today, a military regime is once again hell bent on depoliticizing the 'public sphere' through a frontal assault on the two mainstream political parties. This self-serving mutilation of the political process will come to haunt Pakistan in a few years as it wanders aimlessly looking for a political society to clean the mess left behind by authoritarian absolutism. Trouble is, it might be too late then.