Civil Society and Democratization Process in Developing Country: A Review

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Abstract: Civil society is an essential pillar of democracy. The role of civil society in developing country to establish democracy is very vital and important. This paper presents the concept of civil society, its origin, idea of democracy, democratization and finally the role of civil society in democratization process especially in developing country like Bangladesh.

Key words: civil society, democracy, democratization, developing country.

I. INTRODUCTION

Civil society encompasses the social groups and institutions between the individuals and the state. The existence of an active, diverse and inclusive civil society is an integral component and important indicator of a mature democratic society. It is acknowledged that civil society organizations contribute to democratic consolidation by strengthening governance mechanisms and promoting open and transparent decision-making processes. In recent years suggests that one can not overlook the contribution of the civil society to democratization and democratic consolidation in developing countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, The Philippines etc. Without the participation of the civil society, it would not have been achieved. Although their role was only supportive, it lent popular weight to the democratic transition and helped deepened democracy.

II. CONCEPT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society encompasses the social group and institutions between the individual and the state.

![Diagram](Diagram.png)

Civil society is the aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest interests and will of citizens but operating outside the governmental and non–profit sectors. Civil society includes the family and the private sphere, referred to as the “third sector “of society, distinct from government and business.

Civil society organization are now sometimes called “intermediary institution and include NGOs, independent media, community and social groups, professional associations, trade unions, self – help groups, social and professional associations, social and political movements, advocacy groups and like. United Nations, Red Cross and rotary international are international civil society.

According to Gordon White: "Civil society is an intermediate associational realm between the state and the family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values or identities “


According to Larry Diamond, Civil society involves private citizens acting collectively to make demands to the state or to express in the public sphere their interest, preferences and ideas or to check the authority of the state and make it accountable. “


Finally, it can be said that civil society is the entire range of organized groups and non-profit organizations that are independent of the state, voluntary and at least to some extent self generating and self – reliant. Civil society always work for the welfare of common mass through criticizing governmental work that can be harmful for citizen as well as for country. Besides this a civil society can help government for strengthening democracy in different ways.

III. FEATURES OF CIVIL SOCIETY

1. Civil Society consists of non-governmental, voluntarily organized associations, organizations and institutions of the people.
2. Civil Society is different from both the State and Society.
3. Civil Society is, however, neither opposed to state nor to society. On the contrary it works as a
supplementary to each of the two. It, however, works in an organized and autonomous way.
4. A healthy and efficient democratic system needs and integrates civil society, society and state.
5. Civil Society is constituted by the well-organized and active presence of a number of social, economic and cultural associations and groups of the people.
6. Both Liberalism and Marxism accept and advocate the role of Civil Society but each conceptualizes it in a different way.

IV. EXAMPLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY
Civil society organization may include – NGOs, Community-based organizations, Environmental groups, Faith-based organizations, Women’s rights groups, Farmer associations, Philanthropic organizations, Human rights groups, Labor unions, Co-operatives, Independent research institutions, Universities, Diaspora groups, Citizen Advocacy groups, Inter-governmental organizations and Independent as well as non-profit media.

United Nations, Red Cross and Rotary International are international civil society.

V. CIVIL SOCIETY OF BANGLADESH
In the light of the characteristics of civil society, the space of civil society in Bangladesh is very limited and has become even more so over the years,

“Tel Gas Rokkha Committee” - Anu Mohammad “, Sujon “ - by Bodiul Alam Mojumdar, Transparency International of Bangladesh, different NGOs, Nagorik Committee (although it has been inactive since mid 2007) are considered as civil society of Bangladesh.

Despite the corrupting influence of money and partisan ownership, the Bangladeshi media with a few exception, has proven to be an effective partner to civil society in the last few years.

VI. TYPES OF CIVIL SOCIETY
1) Humanitarian, (Short-term relief to prevent death)
2) Development, (Long- term efforts to improve quality of life in economic, political and social sectors)
3) Human rights, (efforts to create supportive political environment)
4) Peace building, (works specially to address conflict)

It’s origin: The first proposer of the concept ‘civil society’ is Adam Ferguson. He expressed his proposal of ‘civil society’ in his famous book ‘An Essay on the History of Civil Society which has been published in 1767.

Besides this, from the writings of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero in classical period; Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Rousseau, Kant in Pre-modern period; G. W. F. Hegel, De Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci in modern period; we have got the idea of civil society in various style or ways.

In post –modern period; however, in the 1990s with the emergence of the non-governmental organizations and the new social movements on a global scale, civil society as a third sector became treated as a key terrain of strategic action to construct an alternative social and political order. Post-modern civil society theory has now largely returned to a more neutral stance.

VII. DEMOCRACY
Abraham Lincoln, former president of America has provided with the much appreciated definition of democracy by avowing democracy as a system “of the people, by the people and for the people”. Based on the definition, democracy can be understood as the system of government by the people in which the ultimate power is kept in the hands of the people exercised directly by them or by their elected authority through a free and fair electoral process.

The following pillars of democracy can be figured out:

- Sovereignty of the people.
- Government based upon consent of the governed.
- Majority rule.
- Minority rights.
- Guarantee of basic human rights.
- Free and fair election.
- Equality before the law.
- Due process before law.
- Freedom of expression and freedom of the press.
- Constitutional limits on government.
- Social, economic and political pluralism.
- Values of tolerance, cooperation and compromise.

VIII. DEMOCRATIZATION
Democratization means the introduction of a democratic system or democratic principles. In other words democratization is a process by which democracy expands, within, a state or across the world.

Democratization is ‘the transition to a more democratic system of government’.

Democratization refers to administrative reforms that enhance democracy. Ideologically, democracy is fundamentally about governance-by-consent. Citizens must be capable of holding governmental bodies affecting them accountable.

(Johnson, 2001, Bhagwati, 2002)

Institutionally, it promotes –

- universal suffrage,
- regular multi-parties elections,
- an independent judiciary and
- a role for public interest group.
Process of Democratization

There are three different stages that a nation moves towards a consolidated or stable democracy. The Freedom House’s democracy rankings categorizes different states as (1) Pre-transition stage, (2) Transition stage and (3) the Consolidation stage in considering 28 countries of the east central Europe in Nations in Transit 1999-2000. (McConnel and Becker 2002)

IX. THE CONSOLIDATION STAGE

This is the most difficult stage to consolidate sustainable democracy. In this stage the state must be democratic attitudinally, behaviorally, and of course constitutionally. The state functions must be accountable, transparent, representative, competitive, and accessible. The ruling regime must produce sufficient positive output to create legitimacy for the democratic process. (Diamond, 1999)

X. THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

Democracy is consolidated when it is made stable, vibrant, efficient and accountable. Civil society can play an important role in strengthening and deepening democracy. It can serve as a mechanism for political participation and mobilization, disseminating democratic principles and norms.

1. Limit and control the power of the state: The first and most basic role of civil society is to limit and control the power of the state. When a country is emerging from decades of dictatorship, it also needs to find ways to check monitor and restrain the power of political leader and officials. Civil society actors watch how state officials use their powers. They raise public concern about any abuse of power. For example: The most prolonged dictatorial rule of general Ershad was deposed in 1990 by a popular mass upsurge. The role of civil society in the mass movement of 1990 was mentionable for organizing common people. According to Larry Diamond- “Civil society can play a role in checking, monitoring and restraining the exercise of power by the state and holding it accountable ”

2. Consolidate democracy: Civil society organization can help consolidate democracy in a number of ways. For example: It can criticize ill or bad works of government and help to reduce political corruption which pervasive in emerging democracies.

*It can force the government to be more accountable, transparent, and responsive to public which strengthens its legitimacy.

3. Remove corruption: An important function of civil society is to expose the corrupt conduct of public officials lobby for good governance reforms. Even where anti-corruption laws and bodies exist, they cannot function effectively without the active support participation of civil society.

4. Watchdog rule for free and fair elections: Democracy-rule by the consent of the people-requires free, fair and vigorously competitive election. Elections provide the starting point for a democratic transition and democratic system of governance. Civil society can play important roles in this regard by providing a supply of ideas for electoral and institutional reforms. Such group can also create a demand for reform by mobilizing public opinion. This group can play a watchdog role to ensure free and fair election.

For example: On the eve of the ninth parliament elections held in december 29, 2008, a major initiative by “Shujan” attracted considerable media attention.

Ref. [Role of civil society in Bangladesh’s democratic transition; by prof. Badiul Alam Majumdar and John Coonrod, octobar 9, 2009 Boston, USA ]

5. Make the elites and the mass public more committed to democracy: Civil society organization can play a vital role in making the elites and the mass public more committed to democracy by disseminating democratic principles and ideas. Organizations that are involved specifically in the protection of civil rights and freedoms; as well as political reform, can be particularly important in this regard.

6. Stimulate political participation: Civil society organizations play in consolidating democracy by political participation. It can supplement the role of the political parties in encouraging people to get involved in politics, especially as voters in elections. Political participation strengthens the legitimacy and the institutionalization of democratic government, which are essential for democratic consolidation.

Ref. [Lerry Dimond, Ibid, p. 242 ]

7. Empower the people: Civil society’s role in empowering the people as well recognized. Civil-society organization in many democracies performs the function of representing the interest and asserting the rights and power of the people. In several new democracies such as Indonesia and Thailand, many interest groups are loosely organized and unable to articulate their interests. Civil society organization can come in and help interest groups and people to fight more effectively for their interests, there by empowering them.

Ref. [Dimond, Ibid. p-244 ]
8. **Develop other values of democratic life:** Civil society organization help to develop the other values of democratic life; tolerance, moderation, compromise and respect for opposing points of view. Without these deep culture of accommodation, democracy cannot be stable. These values cannot simply be taught; they must also be experienced through practice. I have outstanding example from other countries of NGOs especially women’s groups that have cultivated these values in young people and adults through various programs that practice participation and debate.

9. **Develop democratic civic education:** Civil society also help to develop programs for democratic civic education in the schools as well. After dictatorship, comprehensive reforms are needed to revise the curricula, rewrite the textbooks, and retain teachers in order to educate young people about the crimes of the past and teach them the principles and values of democracy. This is too important a task to leave only to officials in the education ministry. Civil society must be involved as a constructive partner and advocate for democracy and human rights training.

10. **Mediating and helping to resolve conflict:** Civil society organizations can play an important role in mediating and helping to resolve conflict. In other countries, NGOs have developed formal programs and training of trainers to relieve political and ethnic conflict and teach groups to solve their disputes through bargaining and accommodation.

11. **Expression of diverse interests:** Civil society is an arena for the expression of diverse interests and one role for civil society organizations is to lobby for the needs and concern of the needs and concern of their members, as women, students, farmers, environmentalists, trade unionists, lawyers, doctors, and so on. NGOs and interest groups can present their views to parliament and provincial councils, by contacting individual members and testifying before parliamentary committees. They can also establish a dialogue with relevant government ministries and agencies to lobby for their interests and concerns.

12. **Provide new forms of interests and solidarity:** Civil society can strengthen democracy is to provide new forms of interest and solidarity that cut across old forms of tribal, linguistic, religious, and other identities. When people of different religions and ethnic identities come together on the basis of their common interests as women, artists, doctors, students, workers, farmers, lawyers, human rights activities, and environmentalists and so on, civic life becomes richer.

13. **A training ground for future political leaders:** Civil society can provide a training ground for future political leaders. NGOs and other groups can help to identify and train new types of teachers who have dealt with important public issues and can be recruited to run for political office at all levels and to serve in provincial and national cabinets. Experience from other countries shows that civil society is a particularly important arena from which to recruit and train future women leaders.

14. **Inform the public issues:** Civil society can help to inform the public about the important public issues. This is not only the role of mass media, but of NGOs which can provide forums for debating public policies and disseminating information about issues before parliament that affect the interest of different groups of society at large.

**XI. CRITICISM OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

1. Individuals of civil society of various professions, engage themselves in politics.
2. Sometimes they act as agent of their favorite political party though they should remain impartial.
3. The legitimacy of NGOs, as civil society actors in Bangladesh, is also highly problematic. Most of our NGOs are service delivery types. Only a limited number of NGOs take on an advocacy role that is advocating for human rights, inclusiveness, social justice, clean politics, transparency and accountability.
4. Many other service delivery NGOs function like mercenaries and initiate activities based on the availability of funding instead of pursuing their own priorities and they generally shy away from taking positions critical of public authorities–even at the cost of sacrificing public interest.
5. A large number of service delivery NGOs, on the other hands, engage in micro-credit, thus playing the role of “bankers”.
6. Many scholars consider NGOs as the agent of imperialism.
7. Many of the NGOs are either aligned with political parties or are direct creation of political forces. For example – Kazi Fareq Ahamed, former chairman of a NGO, name “Proshika”, formed a political party which name was “Oikkhoboddho Nagori Andolone” at the time of 1/11 in May, 2008. Subsequently he took participation in the national election of 2008 with 3 seats directly which had been criticized highly that time as the role of NGO of a country should be impartial and non-political.
8. NGOs are taking funds from various donor agencies. Though they operate with the legal framework of the country, in most cases they are accountable to the donor agencies rather than government of Bangladesh.
9. NGOs are working with the government without having any coordination among them. It creates duplication of activities and wastages of money.

XII. CONCLUSION

Despite of some limitations civil society plays very important role in the process of democratization. It needs to be autonomous and able to resist manipulation by the state and business interests. A strong and reliable civil society can represent the interests of the people and community and serve as a check on the use of power by the state. There are signs of an increasing strength and assertiveness in civil society in the democracies in Asia as well as Bangladesh. It will be stronger, more autonomous and play a meaningful role for democratic consolidation in the future. Civil society organizations will be more active in stimulating the political awareness of the mass public and encouraging their political participation to protect their own interests. Through these efforts, government can be more accountable and responsive to the people needs, and the elites and the mass public will be more committed to democracy. Hence, democratic consolidation will be achieved. The government of Asian democracies can accelerate the development of civil society. Instead of using a corporatist model to co-opt civil society and restrict its autonomy, states can provide assistance to civil-society organizations to perform their functions more effectively. This assistance should be in form of financial support and training of personnel. In addition civil society’s autonomy should be violated. The government should not be afraid of free civil society since it encourages government to be more honest, accountable, transparent and responsive to the public demands, which will win the support of the people and strengthen their legitimacy. Civil society is a check, a monitor, but also a vital partner in the quest for this kind of positive relationship between the democratic state and its citizens.

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