

Unit 21

Civil Society and Democracy

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Learning Objectives

After you have read this unity you will be able to

- explain what is civil society
- outline the relationship between civil society and democracy
- democractise of danger of civil society

21.1 Introduction

In the recent years the concept like 'civil society' and concern for democracy has gained much of the space in academic discussions, debates and writings around the world. In the world of ideas, civil society is hot. It is almost impossible to read an article on foreign or domestic policy without coming across some mention of the concept. Though the terminology 'civil society' and 'democracy' is as old as the social science is yet they have undergone radical change in its meaning and essence. For our understanding of the concepts, it would be desirable to have a look at the historical perspectives of these concepts, where different intellectuals have placed their thoughts in these directions.

21.2 Civil Society: A Retrospection

The rise in popularity of civil society was largely due to the struggles against tyranny waged by resistance groups in Latin America, Africa and the former communist world. The period of 1980s and 1990s witnessed the advent of a global democratic revolution of unprecedented proportions, unions, women's organisations, student groups and other forms of popular activism provided the resurgent and often rebellious civil societies in triggering the demise of many forms of dictatorship. These developments encouraged the rise of the complex notion that if an invigorated civil society could force a democratic transition, it could consolidate democracy as well.

The term 'civil society' can be traced through the works of Cicero and other Romans to the ancient Greek philosophers. In its classical usage civil society was largely equated with the state. The modern idea of civil society found expression in the Scottish and Continental Enlightenment of the late 18th

century. Here a range of political philosophers, from Thomas Paine to George Hegel, developed the notion of civil society as a domain parallel to but separate from the state where citizens associate according to their own interests and wishes. Hegel's nineteenth-century notion of civil society included the market in contrast to contemporary concepts of civil society as a non-profit sector. This new definition reflected changing economic realities: the rise of private property, market competition and the bourgeoisie. It also resulted in the mounting popular demand for liberty, as manifested in the American English and French revolutions.

The term, however, lost its concurrence in the mid-19th century as political philosophers and sociologists turned their attention to the social and political consequences of the industrial revolution. It bounced back into fashion after World War II through the writings of the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci who revived the term to portray civil society as a special nucleus of independent political activity, a crucial sphere of struggle against tyranny. Although Gramsci was concerned about dictatorships of the right, his books were influential in the 1970s and 1980s amongst persons fighting against dictatorships of all political stripes in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Czech, Hungarian, and Polish activists also wrapped themselves in the banner of civil society, endowing it with a heroic quality when the Berlin Wall fell.

Understanding the importance of the given concept, recently David Held tried to give shape to the concept of 'civil society' through a sociological definition. In his words, "Civil society retains a distinctive character to the extent that it is made up of areas of social life—the domestic world, the economic sphere, cultural activities and political interaction—which are organised by private or voluntary arrangements between individuals and groups outside the direct control of the state."

Suddenly, in the 1990s, civil society became a mantra for everyone from presidents to political scientists. The global trend toward democracy opened up space for civil society in formerly dictatorial countries around the world. In the United States and Western Europe, public fatigue with tired party systems sparked interest in civil society as a means of social renewal. Especially in the developing world, privatisation and other market reforms offered civil society the chance to step in as governments retracted their reach. And the information revolution provided new tools for forging connections and empowering citizens. Civil society became a key element of the post-cold-war zeitgeist.

21.3 Democracy: A Universal Appeal

Like 'civil society', 'democracy' has also been a fluid concept across the times and places. Sharp contrast could be visualised between ancient Athenian democracy and modern liberal democracy, representative democracy and deliberative democracy, national democracy and cosmopolitan democracy.

Yet a common theme runs through all these conceptions of democracy that it is a condition where a community of people exercises collective self-determination. Through democracy, members of a given public demos take decisions that shape their destiny jointly, with equal rights and opportunities of participation and without arbitrarily imposed constraints on debate. Given the paucity of space it would be sufficient to say that democracy is essentially participatory, consultative, transparent and publicly accountable. By one

mechanism or another, democratic governance rests on the consent of the governed.

Emphasis added, democracy is constructed in relation to context and should be reconstructed when that context changes. Contemporary globalisation constitutes the sort of change of situation that requires new approaches to democracy.

According to Schmitter and Karl, for purposes of clarity and consistency, modern political democracy is defined as “a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the cooperation of their elected representatives”

Before, we attempt to make analysis of the relationship between civil society and democracy, how far they could be complementary in promoting each other, it would be imperative to have a view of the over-arching concept of civil society.

21.4 The Scope of Civil Society

The much of the current enthusiasm about civil society is its fascination with non-governmental organisations, especially advocacy groups devoted to public interest and causes and its concern for environment human rights, women’s issues, rights of the disabled, election monitoring, anticorruption, etc. Such groups have been on the increase in recent years, particularly in the countries under influence of democratic transitions. However, it would be a misconception to equate civil society with mere NGOs. Whereas civil society is a much broader concept, encompassing all the organisations and associations that exist outside the state including political parties and the market oriented organisations, it includes the plethora of organisations that political scientists traditionally label— interest groups or pressure groups. Apart from NGOs, labour unions, professional associations (such as those of doctors and lawyers), chambers of commerce, ethnic associations and others. The list is all comprehensive; it also incorporates many other associations that exist for purposes other than advancing specific social or political agendas, such as religious organisations, student groups, cultural organisations, sports clubs and informal community groups.

Emphasise added, non-governmental organisations do play important role in developed and developing countries. They help in formulating policy by exerting pressure on governments and by furnishing technical expertise to policy makers. They induce citizen participation and civic education. They provide leadership training to young people who want to engage in civic life but are apathetic towards political parties. In theocratic and dictatorial countries NGOs are outweighed by more traditional parts of civil society. Religious organisations, cultural organisations and other groups often have a mass base in the population and secure domestic sources of funding. Here, advocacy groups usually lack domestic funding.

The burgeoning NGO sectors in such countries are often dominated by elite-run groups that have only weak ties with the citizens and for their functioning they largely depend on international funders for budgets they cannot nourish from domestic sources.

Apart from these positive contours of civil society formation, it is worth

pointing out that the mafia and militia groups are also as much as part of the civil society as the other humane organisations are. Some civil society enthusiasts have propagated the one sided notion that civil society consists only of noble causes and welfare action-oriented programmes. Yet civil society everywhere is a mixture of the good, the bad, and the outright bizarre. A random surfing through web pages on the Internet helps convey a sense of that diversity where one gets through the real scope of civil society.

If one limits civil society to those actors who pursue higher humane aims, the concept becomes, 'a theological notion, not a political or sociological one', which could injure the notion of society itself.

21.5 Relationship between Civil Society and Democracy

It is emphasised here that in certain conditions civil society can contribute to the democratisation of authoritarian regimes and can help to sustain a democratic system of governance once it is established. For example, in the Eastern European countries, South Africa, Serbia, Philippines, and recently in Georgia, citizens have used civil society organisations to wage struggle for political independence by learning about democracy and by mobilising millions of their fellow citizens against repressive regimes.

In democratic setup, civil society organisations provide basis for citizens to pursue common interests in political, social, or spiritual domain; here they participate freely, collectively and peacefully. By their involvement in civil society, citizens learn about fundamental democratic values of participation and collective action and they further disseminate these values within their communities. Civil society movements that represent citizen interests can considerably influence both government policy and social attitudes. Independent activities of the civil society can pause a counterweight to state power.

Box 21.1: People's Power

The idea of civil society is largely associated in many Westerners' minds with 'people power' movements to oust dictators. The successful Western democracy, programs to strengthen civil society in different parts of the world have become a standard agenda for U.S. and European countries. It is also known as the 'democracy promotion tool kit'. Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway provide two interesting contributions to the discussion on the potential collaborative role of the international community and civil society in consolidating democracy. "Aiding Democracy Abroad" is one of the most comprehensive and important published work on current practices in U.S. democracy promotion. Carothers without going into the international relations debate over whether democracy promotion as a strategy, corresponds to realist security interests or idealist, humanitarian motivations. He claims that it is the blend of the two.

To substantiate his view point in a systematic manner, he discusses three central aspects of democracy aid: electoral assistance, institutional reform, and civil society assistance. He does this by elaborating on four case studies of countries on the receiving end of various types of U.S. democracy assistance: Guatemala, Nepal, Zambia, and Romania.

Democracy aid, in Carothers's view, is the byproduct of democratisation, not the vice-versa. The political space created by democratising regimes has made it possible for international assistance to pursue democracy promotion in these countries. In his conclusive observation, he remarks that despite variations in local context, U.S. democracy promotion activities follow a 'one size fits all' democratic template, which is not a healthy promotion scheme. This template of aiding democracy, he propounds, has developed in the course of practice rather than by conscious application of academic theories.

The strengthening of civil society in different parts of the world is frequently offered as the answer to the questions pervasive in Washington, How can the Arab world democratise? And what should the United States do to help democracy there?

Though one can not concur U.S. interference in the internal affairs of any other country yet there is strong consensus among scholars that civil society is uppermost to the incarnation of democracy. John Keane expresses this view when he notes that "where there is no civil society there cannot be citizens with capabilities to choose their identities, entitlements and duties within a political-legal framework."

21.6 Functions of Civil Society in a Democratic Order

Throwing light about the functions of a civil society in promoting democratic polity, Larry Diamond in his article, '*Rethinking Civil Society*'(1996), says, "Civil society plays a significant role in building and consolidating democracy." He opines: "The democratic civil society...the more likely it is that democracy will emerge and endure". In Diamond's view, civil society performs following important functions:

- 1) To limit state power—By checking its political abuses and violations of the law and subjecting them to public scrutiny. Diamond maintains, "a vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy than initiating it."
- 2) To empower citizens by "increasing the political efficacy and skill of the democratic citizen and promoting an appreciation of the obligations as well as rights of democratic citizenship."
- 3) To inculcate and promote an arena for the development of democratic attributes amongst the citizens—Such as tolerance, moderation, a willingness to compromise and respect for opposing viewpoints." According to Diamond, this is an important function as it allows "traditionally excluded groups—such as women and racial or ethnic minorities—access to power that has been denied them in the 'upper echelons' of formal politics."
- 4) To provide avenues for political parties and other organisations allowing them to articulate, aggregate, and represent their interests- This enhances the quality of democracy as "it generates opportunities for participation and influence at all levels of governance, not the least the local government."
- 5) To function as a recruiting, informational and leadership generating agency especially in economically developed societies—Where, Economic reform is sometimes necessary, but often difficult to bring about if it threatens vested economic interests. the massive economic collapse in Indonesia

unleashed mass discontent and made President Suharto suddenly vulnerable. This transformed the environment to allow civil society groups and opposition parties to mobilize citizens in an unprecedented fashion.

- 6) A well founded civil society could act as a shock observing institution, where wide range of interests that may cross-cut and mitigate the principal polarities of political conflict.
- 7) To generate public and political support for successful economic and political reforms—which require the support of coalitions in society and the legislature.
- 8) A well-rooted civil society also helps in identifying and train new political leaders—As such, it can “play a crucial role in revitalising...the narrow and stagnant” party dominated leadership recruitment patterns.
- 9) Election monitoring— Many non-partisan organisations engage in election monitoring at home and abroad. Such efforts, says Diamond, “have been critical in detecting fraud, enhancing voter confidence, affirming the legitimacy of the result, or demonstrating an opposition victory despite government fraud.” The Philippines in the mid 1980s and Panama in 1989 are cited as examples.
 - a) Strengthening citizen attitudes toward the state— Civil society enhances “the accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, effectiveness, and hence legitimacy of the political system.” In so doing it gives citizens respect for the state and positive involvement in it. Here, civil society is crucial to the development and maintenance of stable, quality sensitive democracy.
- 10) In addition to this, other scholars have also come out with their view point on the subject. Borrowing from Robert Dahl’s classic work on democracy, Alfred Stepan in his work, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (1996), states that among the basic requirements for democracy “is the opportunity to formulate preferences, to signify preferences, and to have these preferences weighted adequately in the conduct of government.” According to Robert Dahl for the proper functioning of the government, it should ensure the following institutional guarantees which include:
 - 1) freedom of association and expression;
 - 2) the right to vote;
 - 3) run for public office;
 - 4) free and fair elections;
 - 5) the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes;
 - 6) alternative sources of information;
 - 7) policy making institutions dependent on votes;
 - 8) Other expressions of preference.

Box 21.2: Fundamental Liberties

However, while accepting the importance of these institutional guarantees, Stepan considers them as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the functioning of democracy. Not sufficient, ‘because no matter how free and fair the elections, and no matter how large the majority of the government, the political society’ lacks quality unless it is able to produce a constitution that provides for fundamental liberties, minority rights, and a set of institutions and checks and balances that limit state power and ensure accountability, necessary for any given democratic system.

21.7 Civil Society as a Promoter of Democracy

In an article, 'Civil Society and Democracy in Global Governance', Dr. Jan Aart Scholte makes a comprehensive analysis of the concepts. She not only visualises positive aspects of the relationship between civil society and democracy, but also evaluates the unenthusiastic side of it too.

Taking a positive note of the civil society as promoter of democratic form of governance, Scholte identifies six areas where civil society could advance democracy.

- 1) *Public education*—Awareness is key to any democratic system. The civil society might enhance democracy through educating the public. An informed citizenry could sustain effective democracy, civic associations can contribute a lot by raising public awareness and understanding of world wide existing laws and regulatory institutions. To accomplish this goal civil, society groups can prepare handbooks and information kits, produce audio-visual presentations, organize workshops, circulate newsletters, supply information to and attract the attention of the mass media, maintain websites on the Internet, and develop curricular materials for schools and institutions of higher education.
- 2) *Voice to stakeholders*—Civil society could promote democratic governance by giving voice to stakeholders. Civic associations can opportune the concerned parties to relay information, testimonial, and analysis to governance agencies about their needs and demands. Civil society organisations can give voice to neglected social circles like the poor, women and persons with disability who tend to get a limited hearing through other channels including their elected representatives in executive and legislative bodies. In this way civic activism could empower stakeholders and mould politics toward greater participatory democracy.
- 3) *Policy inputs*—Government policy formulation is considerably influenced from the Inputs given by the civil society not only at home but also in the international arena. For example, civic groups have been pioneer in sparking debate about the so-called 'Washington Consensus'. They have also constantly raised issues pertaining to ecological imbalances, made qualitative assessments of poverty, and pressurised for the schemes of debt reduction in the South.
- 4) *Transparency of governance*—Vigilant civic mobilisation can cause public transparency in governance. Constant pressure from civil society can help in bringing regulatory frameworks and operations into the open, where they could be accessed for public scrutiny. Generally citizens do not have the awareness about what decisions are taken by the government, by whom, from what options, on what grounds, with what expected results, and with what resources to support implementation. Civic groups through their well lit networks can question the currently popular official rhetoric of 'transparency' by asking critical questions about what is made transparent, at what time, in what forms, through what channels, on whose decision, for what purpose, and in whose interest.

Reflection and Action 21.1

What is civil society? What are its functions in a democracy?

- 5) *Public accountability*—Civil society can hold various concerned agencies accountable to public. Civic groups can keep an eye on the implementation

and effects of policies regarding people and press for corrective measures when the consequences are adverse. For example, independent civic agencies have impartial policy evaluation mechanisms for the World Bank and the IMF. Whereby, they have more often criticised their policies towards the Less Developed Countries. The Western countries, which claim to be democratic in the behaviour, often while as a part of global player some times become far more dictatorial than those whom they criticize and put sanctions against them. Here, the civic agencies through an accountability function can push authorities in global governance to take greater responsibility for their actions and policies.

- 6) *Legitimacy*—The sum total of the preceding actions by the civil society could lead to a legitimate democratic rule. Legitimate rule prevails when people concede that an authority has a right to govern and that they have a duty to obey its directives. As a result of such consent, legitimate governance tends to be more easily, productively and nonviolently executed than illegitimate and dictatorial authority.

Here, it is important to understand that democracy should not be understood only in terms of national governance. The civil society should have a larger agenda of democracy as a policy of global governance. The civil society not only could promote democracy at home, their impact could be clearly seen in the democratisation of global order. Civil society can offer a means for citizens to affirm that global governance arrangements should guide and where necessary, constrain their behaviour.

Apart from this, the international concerns for human rights, women rights, rights of the disabled and concerns for environment have great impact on the domestic policy formulation and its implementation too. For example, various development related NGOs and think-tank,s who lobby for global debt relief and socially sustainable structural adjustment, have gone on to scrutinize public finances in national and local governments. In addition to this, women's movements have often used international laws and institutions in their favour to democratise the state on gender lines. The rights of the persons with disability also get impetus from international concerns for human rights.

21.8 The Democratic Dangers of Civil Society

Civil society's contribution to democracy in domestic as well as global governance is well placed in context. But here it must be noted that civil society might in certain ways actually detract from democratic governance of international relations. In these situations it is not that civic activities fail to realise their democratising potential but that they, in fact, obstruct popular rule. Seven general negative possibilities can be identified.

- 1) *Civil society activities may not essentially pursue democratic purposes.* Though the term *civil* society at the outset seems to convey elements of civility and virtue, but in practice, voluntary associations do not ipso facto have the promotion of democracy on their agenda. On the contrary, elements of such organisations may engage themselves in subverting democracy. For example, some civic organisations can work to promote their private petty interests and privileges. The destructive groups engaged in promoting racism, ultra-nationalism and religious fundamentalism work contrary to the democratic rights of others. Those parts of the Islamic sector that are politically relevant, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have not pushed for democracy in a comprehensive fashion.

- 2) *Civil society might draw away from democracy if its efforts are poorly planned and designed or executed*—if the said activists function without understanding the institutional arrangement of governance, they could cause real harm to the very objectives of their organisation. Even academicians may fail to link their theoretical models of universal application of democracy to empirical evidence and political exigencies of that particular area.
- 3) *Ill-equipped government agencies can not handle civil society inputs*—Regulatory bodies may lack relevant staff expertise, adequate funds, suitable procedures or the necessary receptive attitudes to take advantage of the benefits on offer from civil society. Government officials may consult civic associations only in the later stages of policymaking when the key decisions have already been taken. Instead of promoting democracy this could lead to friction in the society and cause turmoil.
- 4) *The state funding and benefits could corrupt the volunteers of the civic organisations.*—Instead of focusing on their aims and objectives they could run in short term gains.
- 5) *Inadequate representation could seriously undermine the very fabric of democracy*—If civil society has to realise its promises fully, then all stratas of civil society should be duly allowed to access authorities and more over equality of opportunity in terms of participation otherwise civil society can reproduce or even enlarge structural inequalities and arbitrary privileges connected with class, gender, nationality, race, religion, urban versus rural location and so on.
- 6) *Civil society concern for global democracy could be insensitive towards the local cultural practices.*—Here, civil society may not respond to all of the contexts of local population. In particular there is a danger that civil society in the South and the former communist-ruled countries could come under the strong influence of western-styled, western-funded NGOs led by the westernized. Such campaigners might criticize prevailing conditions of global governance; they have stronger cultural affinities with global managers than with local communities. Thus NGOs and other professionalised civil society bodies may perhaps quite unintentionally marginalise grassroot circles that could give better voice to the diverse life-worlds that global governance affects.
- 7) *Civil society may lack internal democracy.*—Civil society groups -including those that specifically campaign for greater democracy, can fall short of democratic behaviour in their own functioning. A lack of internal democracy within civil society circles is not only objectionable in itself, but also contradicts its very goal of bringing democracy to society at large. It is an often realised situation, where civic associations offer their members little opportunity for participation beyond the payment of subscriptions. Civil society organisations may advocate on behalf of certain constituencies without adequately consulting them. The leadership of a civic organisation may suppress debate in the name of welfare. Civic groups may lack transparency as some times they do not publish financial statements or declarations of objectives of their organisation, let alone full-scale reports of their activities.

Given these potential problems, we should balance our enthusiasm for civil society as promoting agency for democracy in domestic as well as international arena with due caution and care. One should not be swayed by much of the

alluring fantasies with civil society. Much can go right but much can also go wrong. Civil society can be a means to good ends, but it is not the end itself. There are circumstances where civic involvement may detract from democracy or sabotage the very fabric of democracy. It should be the first demand of the society that civic associations should not merely assert but also demonstrate their democratic legitimacy.

Reflection and Action 21.2

What is the relationship between civil society and democracy?

In addition to this it should be clearly inferred that those who propagate or fund the very institution of democracy abroad are themselves democratic in their behaviour. U.S. has aided several pro-democracy organisations in the Middle-East since 1991. Majority of democracy aid for the Middle East from 1991 to 2001 had been around about \$150 million. The projects were classified as 'civil society strengthening.' In West Bank and Gaza the United States had funded some Palestinian NGOs during the Israeli occupation—after the Palestinian Authority was created in 1994. The United States expanded this aid and categorized much of it as civil society strengthening. In 2000, US Aid programme launched a \$32 million project to support Palestinian NGOs (mostly service NGOs). In Lebanon, U.S. Aid Programme spent several million dollars to assist community-based service NGOs during the 1990s.

'Aiding civil society' was the leading element of U.S. efforts. Promoting democracy was not the only rationale for these projects. In Egypt, the United States believed that giving private groups an expanded role in development would advance its larger policy goal of economic liberalisation. In the West Bank and Gaza, the United States hoped to generate popular support for the Oslo peace process by helping Palestinian NGOs improve living conditions under self-rule. (In addition, NGOs were a key instrument for channeling aid, because Congress had imposed a ban on direct U.S. funding of the Palestinian Authority.)

In Lebanon, the United States wanted to help local communities rebuilt in the aftermath of civil war. As government agencies were very weak, community-based organisations and NGOs were better aid partners. During the Clinton administration, political Islam became a factor, though not one that was openly acknowledged. Some U.S. officials saw service NGOs as a potential counterweight to the Islamic charities and other groups that were a major source of grassroots' support for Islamist opposition movements and these officials wanted to direct resources to such groups for this reason. However, when in 1991 and 2003 America attacked small countries Iraq and Afghanistan, United States's commitment for global democracy by undemocratic means could be easily inferred. America's liking for democracy is not new, nearly two-dozen military invasions launched in the name of democracy throughout Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean by American presidents (most notably Wilson, president from 1913-21) did not produce a single viable democracy. More instructive still are the most recent instances in which the United States has forcibly removed dictatorial regimes with the implicit promise of creating democracy—Panama in 1992, Haiti in 1994 and Afghanistan in 2002. None of these experiences can be held up as examples of successful democratisation.

21.9 Conclusion

After having done an in-depth study of the civil society in relation to functional and promotional aspect of democracy both at national and international level, we come across a jumbled up situation that those who always propagate democracy as the best and universal system of governance themselves detract from the same while coming to their own interests, even some times petty interests. Still there cannot be two points on the issue that civil society has largely helped to give convenient path to the functioning of democracy. But the general perception that less developed World should accept is that Western Model of civil society and democracy is equally dangerous and self imposing.

There is so much of academic assertion on this point that some anthropologists even question whether the concept of civil society even applies outside the West. In a comparative study of China and Taiwan, for example, Robert P. Weller writes, "I have studiously avoided the term 'civil society' while writing about many of its core issues. The term 'civil society' comes with a set of problematic theoretical assumptions and historical connotations, which have strong roots in a particular European philosophical tradition." Political theorists Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani offer a more explanatory reason for the advent of the concept of civil society: "With the arrival of European colonialism, the state became an undeniable, unavoidable part of the business of social living; and the institutional organisation of the modern state invites a discourse in terms of a state/civil society distinction." However, they largely tried to unfold the debate regarding the advent of civil society and State in the colonial context.

To further evaluate the subject in more theoretical context, the following points could be of use for understanding the existing complexities in the subject.

Firstly, advocates often depict civil society as wholly positive, even flawless. For example, in an article, 'Civil Society and Building Democracy: Lessons from International Donor Experience' Harry Blair says that civil society organisations increase citizens' participation in the policy-making process, enhance the state's accountability to its citizenry, and provide civic education in democratic politics. This describes an ideal—an ideal that since 1989 has helped motivate hundreds of millions of dollars in international grants to civil society organisations in less-developed countries, with mixed results.

Secondly, those who idealise civil society often talk about citizen engagement without mentioning citizen conflict. Yet conflict over resources, laws, policies, influence is central and inherent to the plurality of interests is at the heart of civil society. For this reason, fundamentalist societies that believe in a single source of truth, such as the Soviet Union under Stalin and other communist countries in the latter part of 20th century or Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, are much less tolerant of civil society than societies that welcome plural points of view.

Third, from Tocqueville onward, Westerners have generally placed individualism at the heart of civil society. Ernest Gellner, for example, describes the building block of civil society as 'modular man,' an individual who is autonomous yet willing and able to associate. In much of the world, however, individuals do not consider themselves modular. They regard their identities as members of

particular communities (determined by family, religion, ethnicity, caste, race, or something else) as fundamental, not choices easily made and unmade. For example, in Sakété Center, Muslims, Christians, and worshippers of local gods live together and Muslims and Christians often sacrifice to local gods when facing particularly vexing problems. Yet this openness to different practices does not mean that individuals are modular and can easily exchange one faith for another. Religion, like family and ethnicity, embeds the individual in a web of social connections and cultural meanings that can be severed only at significant cost. The basic thesis of civil society rests with the presumption that man being social is challenged. If individuals are considered modular, how do we fashion a definition of civil society that works trans-nationally?

Fourthly, the concept of civil society is placed with too broad parameters. Some have argued that civil society consists of all forms of non-state organisation other than the family which is unacceptable proposition because it includes within civil society many social forms that are essentially private, and thereby fails to distinguish civil society from society at large. To make the concept more useful for the purpose, 'civil' aspect of civil society must limit the category to those networks, movements and organisations that have a public dimension.

Fifthly, here it is stressed that civil society is essentially two-fold in nature: private in origins but public in focus. Civil society groups represent private interests by employing more often non-violent public means, such as association, education and demonstration to influence policy and polity, whether at the neighborhood, city, regional, state, or national level. The interests pursued can be individualistic, or they can be oriented toward religion, race, or other social groupings. In a way that might generate pressure on government.

To conclude our discussion on civil society with positive academic note the essential idea that has been put into practice is that democracy requires a healthy and active civil society. The international community, by providing resources and training to different civic groups, can help to build up domestic civil society in democratising countries. However, at the same time caution should be duly taken in imposing one's ideas and culture in the name of civil society or as a matter of fact democracy. Though democracy is one of the healthiest systems of governance both in domestic and international arena yet there is no final word in social sciences. There are so many ancient cultural systems and practices in the East which are far better than the existing western way of life. They should not be discarded merely because we have fantasies and fondness for the West. More importantly, the debate and enthusiasm for promoting better life style should continue in order to benefit the people who are living in authoritarian societies with abysmal poverty and sufferings.

21.10 Further Reading

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