

A forlorn hope for civil society

Civil Society
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THE people living within a unit such as a community constitute the societal element of the community. This element is the life-sustaining force of the unit because its survival ensures the continuance of the community.

The components of the societal element in Pakistan are divisible into the vested interests group and the rest. The group includes the landed, tribal and religious feudals, established political families, major commercial interests, the senior bureaucracy, the military, Islamic hardliners, localized ethnic or sectarian mafias, powerful law-breakers and anti-social elements. The bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, the professionals, the middle-range trading communities, trade and labour unionists and the downtrodden masses, including the ordinary folk on the street, fall in the residual category comprising the rest.

Within this configuration the component referred to as civil society comprises, by dictionary description, the ordinary citizenry as distinct from military or religious personnel. In most communities the significance of civil society is gauged by the importance given by communal traditions to citizens' rights, often taken for granted, although, not entirely synonymous with human rights considerations.

In the Pakistani milieu the impact of civil society has invariably been marginal. The marginalization is largely a consequence of the clash between the interests of the vested interests group and the objectives of civil society. Since the control of the affairs of state has at all times

between distributive justice and corrective justice and allows individuals to fulfil themselves in society.

Furthermore, the erstwhile nexus between the Pakistani administration and the twin menaces of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and its current policy of madressah proliferation have created further schisms between the objectives of civil society and the norms of behaviour generated by these developments.

The fourth factor, criminalization of society, while affecting several countries in greater or lesser degree during the past 30 years, appears to have found permanent abode in Pakistan, so that today, despite the omnipresence of the National Accountability Bureau, the vested interest groups and many others, including members of the military, the executive, the legislature, the judiciary and

Despite certain impediments, civil society can still play a meaningful role in the affairs of state provided it is headed by the right kind of leadership. The success of any people-oriented socio-political movement is premised on factors such as the proximity between the objectives of the movement and the aspirations of the affected populace.

So, without suitable leadership, the cause of civil society will drift like a rudderless vessel in uncertain waters, buffeted by fair or ill winds. If such leadership does emerge, it should first set up an organization that should be committed to making a divided people having varied and often conflicting interests and diverse value systems aware of the merits of a uniform civil society.

Furthermore, it should fill the void existing between the policymakers and the populace by encouraging the latter to adopt effective measures for ensuring the protection of their fundamental rights in all prospective enactments undertaken by the legislature. Above all, it should be resolute and resilient in facing any injunctive moves including militant opposition when the interests of civil society conflict with those of the power brokers.

At present, there is no structure or institution in Pakistan devoted to the promotion of the cause of civil society. Therefore, the success, in the short term, of moves made to advance civil rights will depend on the effectiveness of individual promoters.

A more elaborate strategy is required for long-term effectiveness, including foundational programmes identifying the objectives of civil society, defining civil rights, and explaining their correlation to the populace in general and to individual citizens in particular, supported by audio-visual material depicting the history of civil rights movements of, for example, Lech Walesa or Václav Havel or Martin Luther King and others.

This should be initiated at the pre-undergraduate level in both English and Urdu-

of state has at all times remained in the firm grasp of the former, civil society has been suppressed at every turn. Despite this suppression, the cause of civil society has received valiant support from the programmes of certain NGOs, the activism of human rights groups, the publications of the progressive press, the views of moderate media commentators, increased general awareness of the phenomenon and the tacit allegiance of the liberal cadres in the community.

However, this support is not sufficient for civil society to become an important source for influencing national development. Today civil society is stifled by the military presence which permeates all aspects of national life, giving rise to repeated calls for the restoration of genuine democracy. Given the interrelationship between democracy and civil society, both being rooted in the concept of individual rights, the policy objectives a democratic order should, in the normal course of events, coincide with the aspirations of civil society.

However, apart from the freeing of the press, this did not really transpire during the four interchangeable democratic dispensations of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. In promoting their political and personal agendas, both contenders overlooked the rights of the opposition and were either fascistic or dismissive in their approach to civil society imperatives. Given short shrift so far by both the military and civil dispensations, civil society is further imperilled by factors such as Islamic fundamentalism, sectarianism, tribalization, criminalization and lack of leadership, any one of which precludes the adoption of a cohesive approach to civil rights.

The first three factors comprising Islamic fundamentalism, sectarianism and tribalization are authoritarian movements espousing prescriptive forms of conduct deduced from ideological or traditional creeds in contradistinction to the civil rights and liberties formulated by means of inductivism from the Aristotelian concept of a just law which distinguishes

the law enforcement agencies, are, with some exceptions, tainted by criminality, and therefore, unlikely to subscribe to a civil rights regime which challenges their bona fides by demanding accountability.

However, despite such impediments, civil society can still play a meaningful role in the affairs of state provided it is headed by the right kind of leadership. Which brings us to the next problem facing civil society. The success of any people-oriented socio-political movement is premised on factors such as the proximity between the objectives of the movement and the aspirations of the affected populace, the meritoriousness of related programmes, and most importantly, the quality of the leadership spearheading the movement.

Pakistan is especially handicapped when it comes to the leadership issue. Despite the exceptional lead given by Mr Jinnah, all his successors have served us poorly, being either substandard or compromised, thus causing unimaginable harm to the institutions of state, including civil society.

Successful promotion of civil rights calls for leaders of the calibre of Lech Walesa, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Vlaslav Havel, Aung San Suu Kyi and even Sonia Gandhi. Where is the comparable leadership in Pakistan? An overview of the elected members of the national and provincial assemblies does not reveal such propensity amongst them.

Several incumbents have chosen to operate as representatives of the vested interests in preference to their electorate, to rubber-stamp statutory measures prepared by the governing powers instead of legislating them, to promote the forces of obscurantism supporting karkari and the Hudood Ordinance in opposition to those of their colleagues who seek to further the interests of civil society by replacing regressive legislation with progressive enactments.

Moreover, given the commitment of most elected members to respective party agendas, the cause of civil society scarcely ranks as a priority with them.

in both English and Urdu-medium educational institutions by specialist NGOs. The programmes should be designed to create maximum awareness amongst the youth and to generate within them the desire for active participation in civil society programmes.

An added impetus to the promotion of civil rights may be forthcoming in due course, from an unlikely source. The American administration's programme, currently under formulation, crudely described as exporting democracy as an antidote to the spread of terrorism, but essentially entailing a long-term US multilateral engagement with countries susceptible to Islamic militancy, will eventually find its way to Pakistan, for it is generally believed that Pakistan has been the crucible for the scourge of Islamic militancy currently threatening the world order, and, therefore, it should not be left on its own to deal with the problem. The resultant interaction while impacting significantly on our political scenario, would also influence the cause of civil society.

Despite the fact that such developments may impinge on our sovereign status, if the programme is accorded priority in US foreign policy objectives, Pakistan would be hard put to resist it. The truth is that it continues to act irresponsibly in several instances, such as the Afghan strategic depth debacle, or the Kargil misadventure, or the nuclear proliferation scandal.

So if disciplinary measures enjoining Pakistan to comply with norms observed by the liberal nations of the world, were to be imposed on it by an external power, similar to but not having the same implications as the post-World War II arrangements imposed by the allies on Germany and Japan, this may well be a positive step.

General Musharraf is clearly agreeable to embracing enlightened moderation in the national interest. It remains to be seen whether the rest of us are similarly inclined.

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