

Will the real definition of civil society please stand up? No one thus far has given much importance to the theoretical history of civil society and its origins

Photos

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Society & Social News 14-7-02

# Individuals pitted against institutions

A consultative meeting for a World Bank assessment report for Pakistan, was reportedly attended by "farmers, women's groups, NGOs, trade unions, academics, the media, government officials and civil society representatives". In a recent survey questionnaire regarding an evaluation of civil society, the term was broadly defined as "the sphere of institutions, organisations, networks and individuals located between the confines of the family, the state and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance their common interests". The 1999 Human Development Report for South Asia broadly defines civil society as: "including all independent, voluntary and private sector activities comprising of individuals and households, the media, businesses and civil society organisations which include all remaining groups". In a recent news item, participants at a conference viewed the reason behind the heightening conflict between India and Pakistan, to be weak and suppressed civil society institutions in both the countries.

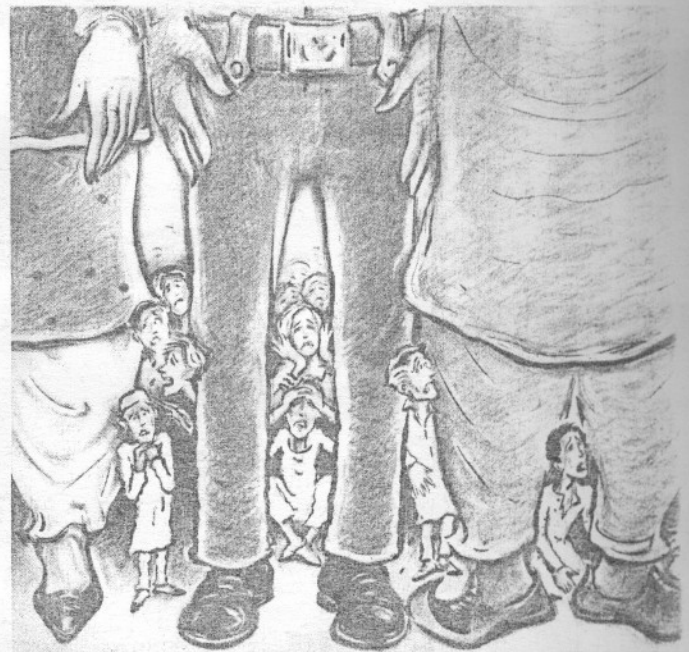
According to the above interpretations, civil society is a) something separate from NGOs, academia and the state; b) it is located between the family, the state and the market; or c) it

This was especially so, since in many such countries of the developing world, the state had a miserable track record. An alternative was desperately needed.

In this rush, no one thus far has given much importance to the theoretical history of civil society and its origins, which is vital in our understanding of the notion altogether. If we don't know what civil society is and what it stands for, then how can we first, expect it to "empower the poor", as is the general consensus in the developing world; and second, decide which sector or sectors to target in order to strengthen civil society? So what is this white elephant known as civil society?

Civil society has its origins in the Latin notion of *civilitas* referring to communities which conformed to norms that rose above and beyond the laws of the state. Civil society would, thus, have included institutions like the medieval Church or the modern Mafia. The term referred to moral value and authority, ie in civil society (or in opposition to it) lay the moral foundations of society. In modern literature, the term first made its appearance in the works of Adam Smith and German philosopher Hegel. Smith used the term to refer to a sphere separate from the political, in which competition and self-interest are played out in the market. Similarly, Hegel also understood it to be a separate sphere existing outside the political state. Karl Marx, in turn, borrowed the term from Hegel, but disagreed with him on the basis that the political state and civil society were one in the same. In fact, Marx went as far as to claim that civil society brought about the breakdown of the individual's relation to society and community by fragmenting the political whole into economic and social parts. Historically, therefore, Marx points to the birth of civil society as a consequence of the modern state.

Noted Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, in the most familiar of modern interpretations, describes civil society in a much different sense: as the sphere that battles capitalist logic. Civil society takes on the notion of 'terrain,' a place where the state, the people, the market interact and where the people wage war against the hegemony of the market and the state. What actual institutions belong to 'the people' therefore change depending on their activity on that terrain: the Church, for example, may be identified with the State while the lower clergy may be associated with the people. Gramsci's



readings of civil society, and the meanings he attached to it in his writings, are those that the world follows most closely today.

The analysis of Smith, Hegel, Gramsci and Marx, among others, are important to re-examine, because they point to a key characteristic flaw in countries like Pakistan. Both Smith and Hegel claimed that civil society was the birth of a new realm, which rose after the dissolution of the old political order and the demise of the monarch as the center of the state. According to this theory, civil society is progressive, democratic and varied-everything "good". But understood, according to Marx, civil society is a modern notion, become part of the economic sphere, rather than as part of politics. But in many countries of the South, the old political order still exists. Property rights, for instance, still dictate political power in a number of developing countries. Civil society then, has yet to be born, echoing the doomsday-like prophecies of Marx.

In some ways, this is the key to understanding the evolving nature of civil society over the decades, since however we choose to understand it, civil society has always followed the rise of new and alternative forces in society and the aspiration to create a private sphere separate from, yet connected to the state. In modern

times, this can include the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, farmers groups, gay rights, etc. All these groups have formed the basis of what civil society stands for today: the "society" in the tripartite world of politics, economics and society.

Although this is hardly a comprehensive historical analysis of the origins of civil society, it does form the basis for a great deal of thought as to its present functions. With the fall of the welfare state, the rise of capitalism and the decline of social capital, civil society has heralded the resurrection of the "proletariat" and redemption from the sins of the State and market. Despite this, in the Pakistani talks of the members of civil society, the first and probably the only character that springs to mind is NGOs.

Currently, however, intellectuals are beginning to argue that NGOs can actually be counter-productive to the development of civil society if they are co-opted by the establishment or pursue donor-driven agendas. Therefore, if NGOs are considered to be the only ingredient of civil society, then it also pits them against all the other forces existing within the institutional realm such as the government and the market. Furthermore, looking at the slow success rate of NGOs and the voluntary sector in a country like

Pakistan, it raises the question to how organised NGOs as CBOs are to be considered a part of civil society, if not the component? This notion as mentioned, went against the prevailing World Bank and I trends of participatory a people-centered development, it did not recognise all the "people" in the larger scheme society, such as small enterprises, media, academics, organized labour unions and even household itself.

If civil society is to be interpreted through the theory Hegel and Smith, then it is a sector that does not include institutional players. It is separate from the bureaucracy; the citizen sector is exactly what states: the citizens themselves. Contrary to this, if we understand civil society according to Ma then all institutions whether in political, economic or social realm, are in some way part of civil society due to the fact that they pursue political and economic interests.

In Pakistan, the case can be analysed more accurately in terms of the theories put forward by Marx. A new and liberal order does not exist in this context. Democracy itself is a contest term and space. Where feudal and traditional structures still flourish and the voluntary sector itself sheltered from the neo-liberal influences of the international

**civilsociety**

# Population growth: justice is the strife

As the concentration of consumption increases in the North, population increases in the South. The only way out of this vicious circle is through a just division of resources and rationalisation of excessive consumption by the rich

By **Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri & Khalid Hussain**

*Population  
News 14-7-02*

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