

Individuals pitted against institutions

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

By Themrise Khan

Society & Social News 14-7-02

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.

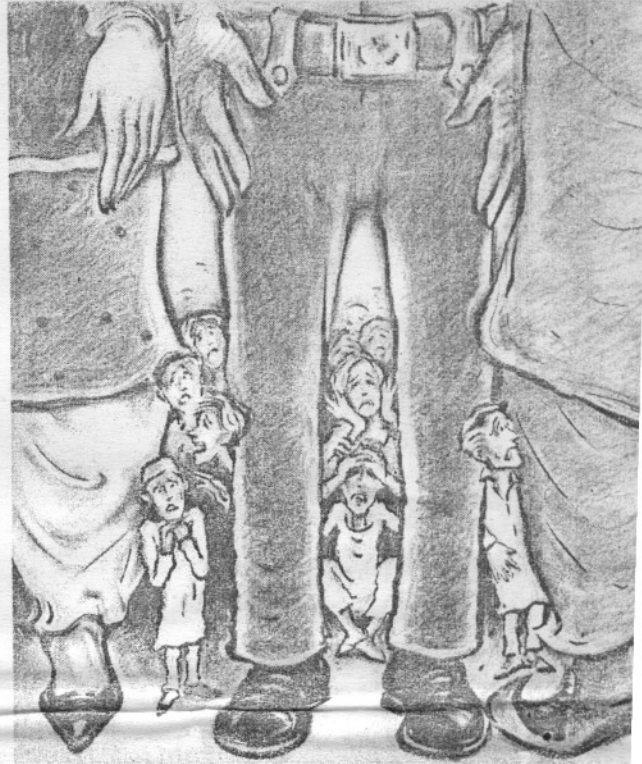
According to the above interpretations, civil society is a) something separate from NGOs, academia and the state; b) it is located between the family, the state and the market; or c) it

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 Industrial Revolution, creating a coercive and complete individual who is in conflict with society.

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.



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, because it is only in the post-European medieval era that the concept of "private rights" have 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.

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 context in particular, the concept of civil society is limited in its thought and vision. When one 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,

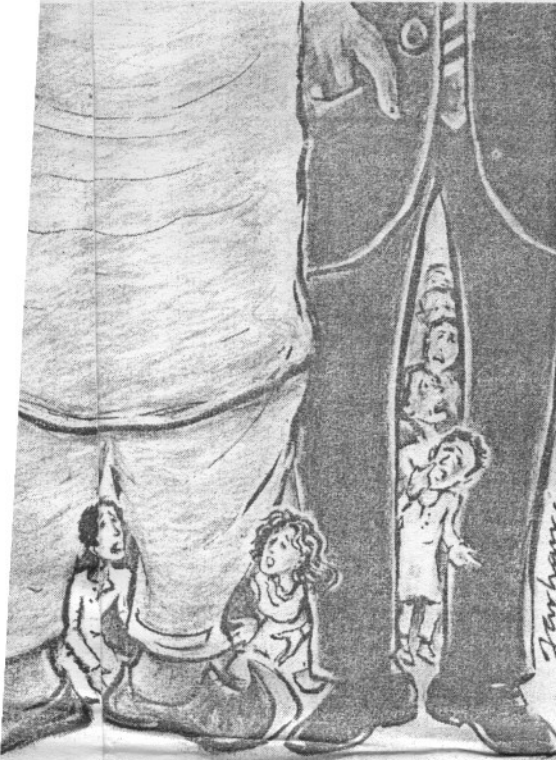
civil society

includes all informal and formal citizen groups. Will the real definition of civil society please stand up? While each of these definitions (and there are a few more) reflect a particular worldview at large, and have their own legitimacy within specific contexts, it is important to be able to pinpoint a precise location where they intersect, so that all the various players (or non-players) can find some common ground on which to work.

But before that, however, one must ask, why is the world so preoccupied with civil society today, when in many countries including Pakistan, the term has yet to be understood clearly? Many understand civil society to be the creation of the "new donor agenda" to bring the people's voices forward in poor and oppressed countries. Since this has been in effect mostly through the efforts of voluntary organisations and NGOs, the term "civil society" is often used to

Pak to CBI par con soc pre tre peo it ("po sor th lal ho int Hi se in se au th ci th st C c t d p r c t e a c taly ingredient of civil society, other forces existing within such as the

ed ions?



is both widening and narrowing the gap between social and economic opportunities, as even small villages in South Asia have access to global satellite channels, while on the other hand, market prices for household commodities takes a major leap every year.

In practice, however, civil society groups are not independent of the State. Politics is the process in which people represent their interests. These interests are incorporated into politics, but still require a monitoring system for people to be able to know that policies are being enforced. Civil society has thus become the "watch-dog" for the people. Depending on which way the river flows, governments either use civil society to flaunt their plans, or to suppress them. Subsequently, civil society itself is thrown into a flux every time a civilian government is overthrown by a military coupe. All of a sudden, it moves from being the under dog to the most prominent player in national politics, or vice versa, it is suppressed and made captive to dictatorial policies.

In any case, civil society has yet to fulfil its claim as one of the main elements for a strong democracy. Assuming greater responsibility, then, is not just the role of State and market institutions, but of civil society as well. In countries like Pakistan, civil society is torn into a number of divisions along class, ethnicity and economic opportunities. NGOs and even voluntary organisations in large cities like Karachi will have a marked difference in outlook and attitude, as compared to their smaller counterparts in the rural areas. Religious organisations, will not entertain the membership of those belonging to other beliefs. Political parties will encourage and support those leaders with the strongest cash flow, rather than those with secular and progressive ideals. Among this conflict of interest, ideas and causes, the "values" of civil society come strongly into question. Marx was probably right after all!

What do we need civil society to actually do for us then? Are we looking at ways to battle capitalism? If so, definitions of civil society cannot include the market, but must exist in conflict with it. If we are looking at ways in which to battle the excesses of the state, how can we not include local government?

Civil society can undoubtedly play a critical role in Pakistan, but first the Pakistani intelligentsia needs to move beyond only the current rhetoric spewed out by IFIs and international NGOs. In order for it to be credible, civil society must understand to whom it is accountable, who it must consider legitimate and from whom it must be independent for it to function smoothly. It must inform and create its own opinion through historical theory and current facts. If civil society is to be a force as comparable to the state and the market, then it must realise the potential that actors like the media, individuals and for-

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

If civil society is to be interpreted through the theory of Hegel and Smith, then it is a sector that does not include any institutional players. It lies separate from the bureaucracy and the market, which contain all the main elements of competition, cooperation and coercion. Thus, the citizen sector is exactly what it states: the citizens themselves. Contrary to this, if we understand civil society according to Marx, then all institutions whether in the political, economic or social realm, are in some way part of civil society due to the fact of their pursuing political and economic interests.

In Pakistan, the case can be analysed more accurately in terms of the theories forwarded by Marx. A new world has emerged

market, the other more common characters of global civil society such as the media, political parties, religious movements and even the household are equally weak and cannot be expected to complete the mould.

A major lag both in the study and in the understanding of civil society has been the lack of acceptance of the role that private sector organisations play in bridging and supporting institutional gaps, although to give credit, this is now being recognised by many in the third sector in particular. The rise and contribution of the non-government sector has undermined completely the fact that profit-making bodies are not just part of the market, but also a vital contributor to the country's social and human capital. Gramsci would not agree with this interpretation, but if civil society is present to protect the social, economic and political rights of a people, what then is the role of the State and the market? Simply to provide the platform for conflict that civil society can resolve? Marx would argue that it would probably worsen the conflict rather than solve it!

This, in effect, is exactly what is happening in Pakistan. The state, market and society are in a state of conflict with each other