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Civil Society and Political Change: Globalization and Transforming Relations in South Asia

Anju Lis Kurian and C. Vinodan

Introduction

Over the past decades, civil society has evolved in propelling socio-economic ontogenesis and political mobilization, especially among South Asian countries. This is considered as a result of the much proclaimed neo-liberal interventions which have much-reduced government obligation in political and economic matters. Moreover, these reforms in democracy witnessed in the last decades with intensified emphasis on human rights have fortified the political institutions of people's movements plus organizations with multifaceted ramifications globally (Court et al. 2006). The non-governmental organizations, public drives along with other civil establishments have exerted their connections internationally in the current era of globalization which forms foundations for emerging transnational civil networks (Florini 2000; Mundy and Murphy 2001). In short, civil society is considered as a magnifier to empathize

A. L. Kurian (✉) • C. Vinodan

School of International Relations and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University,
Kottayam, Kerala, India

politics and is positioned as a pivotal component to explicate democratic political transformations and paradigm shifts in development, especially in developing nations (Veltmeyer 2008).

Civil Society

A *Civil society* is represented by small gatherings of public or amalgamation of these groups, for the betterment and benefit of the public, but functioning outside of the governmental and for-profit sectors. Interestingly, people enter into relationships of civil society by appeal rather than compulsion or force which is the cornerstone of differences between civil society and state. Civil society is neither organized for power, which is the outstanding feature of the state, nor for profit, which is the pivotal attribute of a business organization/establishment (Kumar 1993; Chandhoke 1995).

Generally, civil society has three main gears:

1. representing a multitude of independent political, economic, intellectual, and religious institutions that are identifiable from the family, clan, locality, or state
2. multifaceted relationships with formal and informal rules and procedures and practices for safeguarding the division between civil society and state, but keeping an efficient nexus among both
3. A plethora of fine-tuned civil manners.

In a democratic perspective, civil society is essential for its fulfillment, as it assists as a parcel in the involvement of the attributes of political society, like involvement in political affiliations, election, and associated engagements which are essential for the health and sustenance of democratic governance.

Though the terminology civil society has Western lineage, the term has entered the South Asian political arena which is well illustrated by leaders in government and political society on various occasions. Moreover, there exist broad differences in excogitation of civil society and mentality and response of governance structures and political leadership to civil society

movements across South Asia. The South Asian civil society is a robust and enthusiastic group of people from every walk of life who have contributed to the formation of an effective and efficient flexible alliance or movements which have accented on the importance of promoting people-to-people contacts at all levels beyond borders.

The unprecedented rapidity and extent of civil society's growth in the past few decades in the international scene have resulted in the establishment and conglomeration of "venue" or "forum" which coordinates the global civil society voices to enhance potency, accountability, inclusion, and credibility in international governance. The significance of civil society as a political empowerment structure gained global protuberance since 1980s, coincident with the fundamental global geopolitical and economic changes and numerous transitions all over the world which paves the way to call 'Civil Society' as the 'Third Wave of democracy' by Samuel Huntington (1991).

Civil Society and Globalization

The discourse on globalization and its vibrations on civil society groups are much debatable in the current era of policy issues in the new world order. The diverse nature and dynamics of civil society's relations with the state, as well as collaboration with other non-government/non-profit actors, is in itself suggestive of the depth of strategies and options in alliance with globalization. The role of civil society groups in developing and formulating various policies at the national and international arena is commendable (Tschentscher 2016; CIVICUS 2016). The renowned Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1984, Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, "*The only way to eat an elephant is piece by piece*". It should be noted that the elephant can only be eaten by a highly organized army of ants, which devours the limbs first and gradually works its way to the head. This makes crystal clear that organized civil society can set off with the strengthening of social movements. O'Brien et al. (2000) well illustrated the realm of civil society which quest for extensive social change and transformations.

Civil Society and Political Change

The past two decades have witnessed rapid economic growth and waves of democratization which encouraged people to develop higher expectations not only for their living standards, but also for government operation and answerability. The dimension and role of civil society in this arena are also highly promulgating with accountable victories. No doubt, organizations dwelling in this realm act as a driving force for impacting establishments and administration in political society with unimaginable implications. It should be noted that the process of political change is often not linear, and the structure and function of civil society radicals in the procedure are attached firmly to alter as circumstances change (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Routes of political change via civil society engagement

<i>System maintenance and reform</i>	<p>System reform and maintenance roles may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimizing system by naturalizing norms associated with it and maintaining favorable balance of power • Strengthening participation in and support base for system • Overseeing and encouraging conformity with rules of the game • Promoting effective functioning of system • Furthering reform and development of system including correction of perceived defects
<i>System change</i>	<p>Promote system change through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resisting and denying domestic and international legitimacy for incumbent government and political system • Constructing alternative visions, norms, institutions • Providing refuge and support for political counter-elite • Mobilizing domestic and international support for alternative elite and system • Form social movements and mobilize public at crucial moments to oust incumbent government

Civil Society in South Asia

South Asia is a conglomeration of a myriad of economies and hierarchies with different regimes and interconnection to civil society organizations. In the majority of the post-colonial world, nexus between social campaigns and political parties is too deep which is looped through their genesis in nationalist movements. It should be noted that, the major political parties in the South Asian region are products of patriot movements from time to time. Mammoth mobilization during the independence contends continued in the backwash of freeing as governments sought more involvement which will boost successful participation and administration. It should be noted that women were often active for the first time in politics in these social campaigns. A panoramic view of civil society movements in Afghanistan is well illustrated (Durand 2015) and it has been noticed that civil society movements are eminent interlocutors, working to defend and promote citizen's rights and interests. In Bangladesh, civil society has a profound role and is an indispensable actor to retort radicalization and also to manage different fundamental gears of radicalization (BEI 2014). Moreover, the relationship with the government and civil society is vital in abstracting the issues of radicalization too in Bangladesh.

The civil society in Bhutan constituting different community affiliations and systems forms an inherent part of the tralatitious Bhutanese society which provides the people with chances to participate in driving decisions related to various activities (ADB 2013). Interestingly, the majority of the traditional and new civil society associations/movements act as a nexus in Bhutan to foster citizen empowerment. Civil society in India gains its strength from the Gandhian tradition of volunteerism, but today, it conveys itself in many different facets of activism with a plethora of interventions impinging on the administrative and political arena like the right to information, human rights, social advocacy, environmental conservation including the elimination of corruption from public institutions with very permeating support from all quarters (Sharma 2013). UNDP (2011) depicted a bird's eye view of the Maldivian Civil Society in a comprehensive way with valid conclusions and recommendations for

a brighter future. Though Nepal has a rich history of civil society, the existing is extremely politicized. However, there is an absence of transparent and effective tools to portray the civil society movements (Bhatta 2012). It is quite difficult to have an unassailable assortment of such movements, as they are cross-linked. But, these movements and establishments are bound to face authenticity when these groups lose the humanity/politeness credentials which are more striking in Nepal's case.

Even though the civil society movement in South Asia is considered vivacious, dynamic, and very vocal, it is strangled in Pakistan, especially during the military regime. Pakistan is still at an incipient juncture and needs a certain level of political maturity to offer functioning space for civil society organizations to become an agent for change (Bhattacharya 2016). In Sri Lanka, the civil society custom is dynamic and elaborately threaded with the fabric of the nation. The function of civil society in resettling displaced communities after Tsunami and civil war restored livelihoods, coordinated interventions, co-operated with decision-makers, and cropped towards peaceful declarations are commendable with multifarious outcomes (Yusoff and Sarjoon 2016). In short, the civil society sphere across the South Asian region is well articulated in protecting human rights, transforming relations, political change, promoting economic development, tackling corruption, building peace, and democratic governance.

Democracy and Civil Society in South Asia

The history of democracy deals with the evolution of pathways by which citizens wreak a role in articulating government policies. The effectiveness of democratic tools, therefore, can be evaluated by the degree to which they reduce the gap between citizens and the decisions that affect them. Democracy is consolidated when a reversal to authoritarianism is impossible. Democracy is consolidated when it is made stable, vibrant, efficient, and accountable civil society engagement (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies 2007). The process is complex and the factors leading to democratic consolidation include structural and cultural dimensions too. The South Asian democratic realm exemplifies political

go-through matters more in structuring peoples' orientations to democracy than inherited identities such as religion and ethnicity. The role of civil society movements/groups in inducing the people is well established. The role of civil society organizations in avowing the rights and power of the people in several South Asian democracies is commendable. On the other hand, in several new democracies, many such civil society groups are loosely organized and unable to articulate their interests due to failure in pressure building and common policy portfolio (Girling 2002). Moreover, civil society organizations also can grow and nurture future political leaders who are giants in organizing and motivating people, publicize programs, reconcile conflicts, and build alliances that elicit capacity to deal efficiently with political challenges in the region.

The conglomeration of civil society movements in the South Asian region is achieved through myriad overtures, arraying from executing the role of a critical observer to espousing strategies as a norm socializer and creator of alternative human rights dianoetic positions (Rother 2015). However, institutionalized and structural power in the South Asian region remains rather weak now even though endeavors like the ASEAN Civil Society Conference and ASEAN Youth Forum are attempts in this line. It should be noted that transnational, translocal, regional, and global linkages tone up civil society's role and portfolio in the democratic process across South Asia.

Civil Society and Transforming Relations in South Asia

The rapidly changing socio-economic and political medley across South Asia has affected civil society too. The plethora and paradox of religious beliefs existing in the region flanking with idiosyncratic mindsets, tend to differentiate the countries that make up South Asia which is critical while considering civil society and transforming relations in South Asia. The growing political prominence of civil society in the South Asian realm stimulated thoughts about the concept. The analysis of civil society caters to a better discernment of the interface between society and government

and that it holds not the only key to the political legitimation, but also transforming relations in South Asia. The 'We Can' initiative in the region is the best example of transforming power in relationships in South Asia in response to gender-based violence against women in the region (Mehta and Gopalakrishnan 2007).

It is difficult to conclude about civil society and transforming relations in South Asia as civil society in the region is constantly being re-illustrated and resuscitated. As emerging superpowers like China, India, and Brazil are enrolling and commencing to remake global discourses, economics and transforming relations often from the perception of their own awareness base and heritage will have marked variations, as civil society theory has emerged from North America and Europe. The concept of civil society, while observed and underpinned, as its own typical conception rather than as the aftermath of state or market failure is more acceptable, especially in the South Asian perspective.

Conclusion

The role of civil society in articulating the gravity of human relations is well established irrespective of the geographic realm. Civil society is an indispensable and inevitably repugned idea that is time tested. The challenge for political leadership in South Asian countries is to unify democratic gains via constitutional and institutional systems and to ensure that the licit interests of historically marginalized segments of the population are assured. Only then the social, economic, and political environment that give rise to conflict in the region can be overcome. All countries across South Asia are interpreted on how civil society nurtures or hampers political switches, particularly democratic development, for the theoretic and empiric knowledge of civil society and comparative politics egressed and fed considerably across the region. Civil society engagements in public spheres are vital for development, opinion creation, and public movement which opens new avenues for collective action for the betterment of individual and state without which effective democratic progression would be impossible.

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