

Democracy and Civil Society in the Himalayas: Problems of Implementation and Participation in Multi-ethnic Societies

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Civil society

Although there are many variants of the concept, civil society is made up of 'some combination of networks of legal protection, voluntary associations and forms of independent public expression.'¹ A well-developed civil society potentially influences government in two ways. It enhances political responsiveness by aggregating and expressing the wishes of the public through a wealth of non-government forms of association, and it safeguards public freedom by limiting the government's ability to impose arbitrary rule by force.² Civil society can be defined as the site where society enters into a relationship with the state. As it has been put, 'The values of civil society are those of political participation, state accountability and public politics.... The institutions of civil society are associational and representative forums, a free press and social associations. The inhabitant of this sphere is the citizen.'³ Based on rights, rule of law, freedom and citizenship, civil society becomes the place for a critical rational discourse. It is a precondition for the existence of democracy and a property of democratic states and societies. But the existence of civil society alone is not enough. An

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¹ Jean-Louis L. Cohen, and Andrew Arato, *Civil society and political theory* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992), p.74.

² Ann Marie Clark, Elizabeth J. Friedman, and Kathryn Hochstetler, 'The sovereign limits of global civil society: a comparison of NGO participation in UN world conferences on the environment, human rights, and women', *World Politics* (New Jersey), vol.51, no.4, 1998. See also, Philippe C. Schmitter, 'Civil Society East and West' in Larry Diamond et al., (eds.), *Third wave democracies: themes and perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.247.

³ Neera Chandhoke, *State and civil society: explorations in political theory* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), p.9.

inactive civil society leads to unresponsive states, while only a politically self-conscious civil society imposes limits upon state power. If the political practices of a self-conscious civil society transgress the boundaries of the state sponsored political discourse, a crisis of legitimacy of the state results. Politics is about the dialogues that the society has with the state. As it has been put, "The site at which these encounters take place is a civil society."⁴

Civil society has historically been associated with attempts to control the state and subject state practices to critical evaluation. Civil society cannot ask for a democratic state if it itself is undemocratic, and democratic state requires a democratic society. Civil society can in one sense be identified with democratization and liberalization, but it is a far more comprehensive and deeper concept than democracy. Democratic practices have often been reduced to rituals and staged political events, such as elections, parliamentary representation and plebiscites which are meant to reaffirm the legitimacy of the state. The concept of civil society, on the other hand, embraces an entire range of assumptions, values and institutions, such as political, social and civil rights, the rule of law, representative institutions, a public sphere and a plurality of associations, which are preconditions of democracy.⁵

Concepts of state and society

The concept of the modern nation state is of European origin. Every civilization has its own concept and tradition of state. But the modern nation state, as it is defined by the West, has become the only accepted form of nation state in world politics. The idea of sovereignty, too, has been derived from ancient Greek and Roman Law. With the French revolution of 1789, the European sovereign state turned into nation state. Its legitimacy was based on the principle of people's sovereignty. This type of nation state became a European institution during the nineteenth century and a world institution in the course of the twentieth century. This type of nation state emerged in various parts of the world as a result of Europe's colonization of Africa and Asia, this type of state lacked the cultural homogeneity required for a nation state.

The nation state with its internal and external sovereignty arose from the European bourgeoisie society and its values of a democratic political order. The adoption of the western model of nation state by non-western cultures has been part of the process of colonization. These states failed

⁴ Ibid., p.10.

⁵ Ibid., pp.25-26.

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Samuel Huntington
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Samuel Huntington underlines that the nation state according to its historical definition is a democratic state. But most non-western nation states are not based on democratic societies with people conscious of their citizenship. Instead, these states are dominated by diverse ethnic identities often competing with each other. On the other hand, civil society as the basis of a democratic nation state is not defined by ethnicity. But this does not mean that the nation state necessarily has an ethnically homogeneous society. Moreover, a nation state is the result of a consensus on norms and values of a unified community.

In non-western nominal nation states identity is mainly based on ethnicity with corresponding conflicts. In such states, local forces often gain the upper hand against the central authority, since there is no political community that can integrate the different ethnic, cultural and religious groups.

What Huntington calls 'clash of civilizations' is not an international cultural war. It is more the upheaval of local cultures politically grouped into civilizations against global structures and universally accepted norms and values. Part of this struggle is the opposition against the secular nation state that has not grown from indigenous soil but has been implanted from outside. The clash or war of civilizations is a struggle against the international order of nation states, against the world order. It is a process of de-westernization. The western world order has first been conceptualized after the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years War in 1648. In the course of the next 300 years, the Europeans managed to impose this system upon the whole world.

The nation states of Africa and Asia are thin political surface structures. Under these structures they are conglomerates of multi-ethnic populations and diverse local cultures that are only formally superseded by the territorial national structures. The latter are the connecting links between the local structures and the global ones. Globalization produces socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural structures into which ethnicity and local cultures are incorporated. But global civilization as a consequence of the process of globalization has not been able to integrate the ethnic or we-groups and their local cultures. Only individuals can be integrated. The local cultures become regional civilizations in their area of origin and revolt against the concept of global civilization. They see the nation state as a western intrigue, as a strategy of *divide et impera* to suppress non-western civilizations.