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Civil Society And Democracy

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Abstract:

To resolve the inadequacy of state mechanism, it is understandable that a large number of citizens have considers the civil society as a way to enhance public participation, consultation, transparency and accountability in governance. Thinking a positive note of the civil society as a promoter of democratic form of governance, we may identify several areas where civil society could advance democracy. Civil society has generally helped to give convenient path to the functioning of democracy through increasing citizen participation in policy making process, enhance the state's accountability to its citizenry and provide civic education.

1.Introduction

Ours is the proud privilege of being the largest democracy in the world but which is in the age of a crisis of values. In the recent years the concept like “civil society” and concerned for democracy have gained mach of the space in academic discussion, debates and writing around the world. In the world of ideas, civil society is at the peak. The terminologies ‘civil society’ and ‘democracy’ are as old as the social science yet they have undergone radical change in their meaning and essence. To understand the concepts we have to look at the historical perspective of these concepts.

2.Civil Society- A Retrospection

The term ‘civil society’ can be traced through the works of ancient Greek philosophers. In the classical period, the concept was used as a synonym for the good society and seen as indistinguishable from the state. According to Socrates’ public argument through ‘dialectic’ (a form of rational dialogue to uncover truth) was imperative to ensure ‘civility’ in the polis and middle age, the concept of classical civil society practically disappear from the mainstream discussion by the political philosopher. In the pre-modern age most of the social philosopher like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke considered civil society as a community that maintained civil life, the realm where the civic virtue and rights were derived from natural laws, they also hold the co-existence of the state and civil society. The modern idea of civil society found expression in Enlightenment of late 18th century, have a range of political philosopher, developed the notion of civil society as a domain parallel to it, but separate from the state where citizen associate according to their own interests and wishes. In nineteen-century Hegel’ notion of civil society included the market in contrast to contemporary concepts of civil society as a non-profit sector. This new definition reflected changing economic realities: the rise of private property, market competition and the bourgeoisie. Karl Marx followed the Hegelian way of using concepts of civil society. For Marx, civil society was the ‘base’ where productive forces and social relations were taking place, whereas political society was the ‘superstructure’. Marxist social philosopher Gramsci viewed civil society as the site for problem-solving. Misunderstanding Gramsci the New Left assigned civil society a key role in defending people against the state and the market and in asserting the democratic will to influence the state. Although Gramsci was concerned about dictatorships of the right, his books were influential in the 1970’s and 1980’s amongst persons fighting against dictatorship of all political stripes in Eastern Europe and Latin America. In the 1990’s civil society become the password for everyone from presidents to politicians. The global trend toward democracy opened up space for civil society in formerly dictatorial countries around the world, privatization and other market reforms offered civil society the chance to step in as governments retracted their reach. The information revolution provided new tools for forging connections and empowering citizens. Civil society becomes a key element of the spirit of the time.

3. Democracy – A Universal Appeal

Like 'civil society', 'democracy' has also been a fluid concept across the time and space. With the spread of education and the growth of political consciousness among people the democracy becoming the most common form of Government in modern times. Sharp contrast can be visualized between ancient Athenian democracy and modern form of democracy. Mostly by democracy we mean a form of Government where the people are allowed to participate in the administration. Through democracy, the members of a given public demons take a decision that shape their destiny jointly with equal right and opportunities of participation and without arbitrarily imposed constraints on the debate. Given the paucity of space it would be sufficient to say that the democracy is essentially participatory, consultative, transparent and publicly accountable. By one mechanism or another, democratic governance rests on the consent of the governed. Contemporary globalization constitutes the sort of change of situation that requires new approaches to democracy.

4. The Relationship Between Civil Society And Democracy

In certain conditions civil society can contribute to the democratization of authoritarian regimes and can help to sustain a democratic system of governance once it is established. In different parts of the world, citizens have used civil societies to wage the struggle for political independence of learning about democracy. In democratic setup, civil society organization provide a basis for citizens to pursue common interests in political, social or spiritual domain. Citizens learn about fundamental democratic values of participation and collective action and they further disseminate these values within their communities. The movement of civil society represents citizen interests which can be influenced both government policy and social attitudes. In this reason civil society is also known as the 'democracy promotion kit'. The political space created by democratizing regimes had made it possible for international assistance to pursue democracy promotion in various countries. United State's democracy promotion activities follow a 'one size fits all' democratic template in different countries. This civil society of modern times can't concur U.S. interference in the internal affairs of their country. According to John Keane – where there is no civil society there cannot be citizen with capabilities to choose their identities, entitlements and duties within a political-legal-framework.

5. Civil Society As A Promoter Of Democracy

To resolve the inadequacy of state mechanism, it is understandable that a large number of citizens have considers the civil society as a way to enhance public participation, consultation, transparency and accountability in governance. Thinking a positive note of the civil society as a promoter of democratic form of governance, we may identify several areas where civil society could advance democracy.

5.1. Public Education

In any form of governance, awareness is the key sources of all round development. The civil society might enhance democracy through properly educating the peoples. Civil society can contributes a lot by raising public awareness and understanding of worldwide existing laws and regulatory institutions. To reach this goal, civil society group can take different measure like supply information through hand books, attract the attention of mass media, maintain websites on the Internet and develop curricular materials for school and higher educational institutions.

5.2. Voice Of The Stakeholders

Civil society could promote democratic governance by giving voice to stakeholders. Civil society can provides opportunities for concern parties to relay information, testimonial and analysis to governance agencies. Civil society organization can raise their voice to fulfill the needs and demands of the weaker sections of the society who have a very limited scope. Thus civic activism could empower stakeholders and mould politics toward great participatory democracy.

5.3. Policy Inputs

From the inputs given by the civil society in government policy formulation is considerable influence in the variety of perspectives, methodologies and proposals. For example, civil group have been pioneer in speaking debate about so-call 'Washington Consensus'. They have constantly raised issues pertaining to ecological imbalances, mad qualitative assessments of poverty and pressurized for the schemes of debt reduction in South. Due to civil society policy discussion can become more critical and creative.

5.4. Transparency Of Governance

vigilant civic mobilization can public transparency in governance. Generally, citizens do not have the awareness about what decisions are taken by the government, by whom, from what options, on what ground, with what expectations and with what resources to support implementation. Constant pressure from civil society can help in bringing regulatory frameworks and operation into the open where they could be accessed for public scrutiny.

5.5. Public Accountability

Civil society can promote democracy by increasing the public accountability. Civil groups can keep an eye on the implementation and effect of policies regarding people. For example, independent civic agencies have impartial policy evaluation mechanisms for the World Bank and IMF. The civic agencies through an accountability function can push authority's governance to take greater responsibility for their action and policies.

5.6. Legitimacy

the sum total of the preceding action by the civil society could lead to a legitimate democratic rule. It prevails when people concede that an authority has a right to govern and that they have a duty to obey its directives. Consequently legitimate governance tends to be more easily, productively and non-violently executed.

It is important to mention that democracy should not be understood only in terms of national governance. The civil society should have a larger agenda of democracy as a policy of a means for citizens to affirm that global governance arrangements should be guided and where necessary, constrain their behavior. Apart from this the international concerns for human rights, woman's right, right for the disabled and concerns for environment have great impact on the domestic policy formulation and its implementation too.

6. The Democratic Danger Of Civil Society

Civil society's contribution to democracy in domestic as well as global governance is well placed in context. But civil society might in certain ways actually detract from democratic governance in international relation. Some time civil activities fail to realize their democratizing potential. The term civil society seems to convey elements of civility and virtue, but in practice, they do not ipso facto have the promotion of democracy on their agenda, on the contrary they may engage themselves in subverting democracy.

Civil society might draw away from democracy if its efforts are poorly planned and designed or executed. On the other hand, ill-equipped government agencies cannot handle civil society inputs to take advantage to the benefits on offer from civil society. It is also seen in democratic society that the state funding and benefits could corrupt the volunteers of civil organization – instead of focusing on their aim and objective they could run in short-term gains.

Civil society may lack internal democracy – civil society groups, including those that specifically comparing for greater democracy, can fall short of democratic behavior in their own functioning. A lack of internal democracy within civil society circles is not only objectionable in it, but also contradicts its very goal of bringing democracy to society at large. The leadership of a civic organization may suppress debate in the name of welfare and may lack transparency.

We should balance our enthusiasm for civil society as promoting agency for democracy in domestic as well as international arena with due caution and care. There are circumstances where civic involvement may detract from democracy or sabotage the very fabric of democracy. It should be first demand of the society that civic organization should not merely assert but also demonstrate their democratic legitimacy.

In addition to this it should be clearly inferred that those who propagate or fund the very institution of democracy abroad are themselves democratic in their behavior. United States had aided several pro-democracy organizations in the Middle-East in the name of strengthening civil society, but promoting democracy was not the only rational. In Egypt, the United States believed that giving private groups an expanded role in development would advance its larger policy goal of economic liberalization. In the West-Bank and Gaza, the U.S. hoped to generate popular support for Oslo peace process by helping Palestinian NGOs improve living conditions under self-rule.

However, when in 1991 and 2003 America attacked small countries Iraq and Afghanistan, United States' commitment for global democracy by undemocratic means could be easily inferred. America's liking for democracy is not new, nearly two-dozen military invasions launched in the name of democracy throughout Mexico, Central America, The Caribbean and Middle-East by America, did not produce a single viable democracy.

7. Conclusion

From the above discussion of civil society in connection with promotional aspect of democracy both at the national and international level, we come across a jumbled up situation that those who always propagate democracy as the best and universal system of governance themselves detract from the same while coming to their own interest. But civil society has generally helped to give convenient path to the functioning of democracy through increasing citizen participation in policy making process, enhance the state's accountability to its citizenry and provide civic education.

To conclude this discussion on civil society with a positive academic note the essential idea that has been put into practice is that democracy requires a healthy and active civil society. The international community, by providing resources and training to different civic groups, can help to build up democratic civil society in democratizing countries. However, at the same time caution should be duly taken in imposing one's ideas and culture in the name of civil society or as a matter of fact democracy. Finally, there are so many ancient cultural systems and practices in the East which are far better than the existing Western way of life. They should not be discarded merely because we have fantasies and fondness for the West. More importantly, the debate and enthusiasm for promoting better life style should continue in order to benefit the people who are living in authoritarian societies with abysmal poverty and sufferings.

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