



Role of Civic Society

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ABSTRACT: In the broader field of public administration, the concepts of public accountability and control comprise the element of civic society which, according to the literature available, has come to enjoy much social, political, administrative, and intellectual prominence and currency in recent years. Civic society, however, has a fairly long history. In a traditional sense, the terms state and civic society were used interchangeably and much treated synonymously. This trend continued till the eighteenth century. George W. F. Hegel was the first political philosopher who separated and differentiated civic society from State. He was followed by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, Antonio Gramsci critically analyzed the concept of civic society which is the topic of this article.

Keywords: civic society, social, political, administrative and intellectual prominence and currency, interchangeable and synonymous, separate and differentiated, and organized society.

I. Introduction

In the broader field of public administration, the concepts of public accountability and control comprise the element of civic society which examine is with reference to its role in general and in public administration in general and in particular.

II. The purpose of the article

The purpose of this article is to examine the concept of civic society and to scrutinize its role with reference to Africa and Zimbabwe in particular.

III. Role of civic society

In order to understand the role of civic society, it is important to pay particular attention to the following pertinent fundamental questions:

1. Illustrate the brief statement on civic society by asking these questions:
 - a) Why this concept is called civic society?
 - b) How did it originate?
2. What is meant by civic society in the modern sense?
3. What are the distinguishing characteristics of civic society?
4. What are the components of civic society?
5. What is significant in this question: what is the role of civic society?
6. What are the strengths as well as the limitations of civic society in any developing country?

These questions are meant to provide a working framework for systematically studying this commonly used concept of the role of civic society.

3.1 Brief history

According to literature available, the term civic society has come to enjoy much social, political, administrative, and intellectual prominence and currency in recent years. It however, has a reasonably long history.

In a traditional sense, the two terms state and civic society were used inter-changeably and treated synonymously. This trend continued till the 18th century.

George W. F. Hegel was the first political philosopher who separated and differentiated civic society from State. He was followed by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels in the 19th century. In the 20th century, Antonio Gramsci analyzed the concept of civic society.

3.2 Definitions by a number of scholars and writers;

Jeffery Alexander: “Civic Society is an inclusive, umbrella-like concept referring to a plethora of institutions outside the state”.

Niraja Gopal Jayal: “Civic Society covers all forms of voluntary association and social interaction not controlled by the state.”

S.K. Das: “Civic Society is the Organized Society over which the State rules”.

George Huggins: “Civic Society is defined variously by different theorists, but a minimal definition would include the idea of an non-state autonomous sphere; empowerment of citizens; trust building associational life; interaction with, rather than subordination to the state”.

Larry Diamond: “Civic society represents the realm of an organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, largely self-supporting, and bound by a legal order or set of shared values”.

From the various definitions given above, it is discernible that the following concepts distinguish the civic society:

- Organized social life, that is, although informal, civic society is organized.
- Voluntary, that is, it is not compulsory to belong to it.
- Self-gathering, that is, self-propelled.
- Largely self-supporting, that is, financially sourcing own funds for its operations.
- Bound by a legal order, that is, civic society operates within the legal framework, that is, it observes the laws regulating the community.
- Set of shared values, that is, civic society has values or objectives which its members cherish.

A working definition

A much more inclusive definition states that: Civic society is used to mean all forms of organized voluntary association and social interaction not controlled by the state, self-generating, largely self-supporting, and operating within the constitutional and legal frameworks of the state and observing a set of shared values.

3.3 Characteristics features:

Distinguishing characteristic features of the civic society are that it:

1. Refers to non-state institutions.
2. Covers a large space in society.
3. Refers to the organized society.
4. Covers groups which are intermediate between the state (political society) and the family (natural society).
5. Though autonomous, is subject to the authority of state.
6. Implies the existence of freedom of thought and other civic and economic rights.
7. Is in pursuit of common public good.
8. Opposes authoritarianism and totalitarianism.
9. Promotes citizenship by educating the individual.
10. Facilitates citizens participation in the politico-administrative affairs, that is, relating national, provincial and metropolitan, and local government matters.
11. Formulates public opinion and sets the demands which are general in nature.
12. Is voluntarism, not coercion, as important attributes.

13. Advocates pluralism to reduce the domination of the state.
14. Serves as a moral referent in the community value system.

John Keane, the British theorist, summarizes the current positive thinking about Civic Society as: “The emerging consensus that Civic Society is a realm is a realm of freedom correctly highlights its basic value as a condition of democracy; where there is no Civic Society there cannot be citizens with capabilities to choose their identities, entitlements and duties within a political-legal framework.”

Larry Diamond observed: “Democracy-in particular, a healthy liberal democracy- requires a public that is organized for democracy, socialized to its norms and values, and committed not just to its myriad narrow interests but to larger, common, civic ends. Such a civic public is only possible with a vibrant civic society.”

3.4 Components

The organizations and groups included under the umbrella concept of Civic Society are:

1. Non-governmental organizations,
2. Community-based organizations,
3. Indigenous people`s organizations,
4. Trade Unions,
5. Farmer`s organizations,
6. Cooperatives,
7. Religious associations,
8. Youth groups,
9. Women`s groups, and,
10. Other similarly organized groups.

- Firstly, the case of the United States of America, the Civic Society is highly developed, while in India, it is fast growing since the 1970s.
- Secondly, the words of Niraja Gopal Jayal, “with regard to India, it has been argued that Civic Society, in the sense of opposition to the State, is developed, while Civic Society, in the sense of associational groups, is not”.
- Thirdly, Neera Chandhoke observed, “Civic Society in India is seen by most theorist as a fluid association of social groupings which are based on caste and kinship linkages or on religious mobilization as much as on voluntary social associations”.
- Fourthly, Rajest Tandon categories has classified Civic Society associations in India into five categories:
 1. Traditional associations based on caste, tribe or ethnicity.
 2. Religious associations like Ramakrishna Mission, Institutions, etc.
 3. Social movements of several types, viz.,
 - a. Movements focusing on the needs of a particular group like women or tribal`s;
 - b. Movements to reform social evils like dowry or liquor;
 - c. Movements to protest against displacements due to developments
 - d. Movements focusing on governance like civic liberties campaigns or anti-corruption campaigns.
 4. Membership associations of different types. Viz.,
 - a. Representational like trade unions, peasants organizations and so on.
 - b. Professional like associations of lawyers, doctors, etc.
 - c. Socio-cultural like sports clubs, recreational clubs and so forth.
 - d. Self-help like ward committees in cities or community-based organizations in villages.
 5. Intermediary associations of different types, vitz,
 - a. Service delivery like schools, homes for destitute and so on.
 - b. Mobilization which help organize marginalized sections to demand their own rights.
 - c. Supportive which provide support to other community-based associations
 - d. Philanthropic like Child Relief and You (CRY), Rajiv Foundation, and so forth.
 - e. Advocacy which explicitly advocates a particular cause.
 - f. Network which extend collective voice and strength like association of Voluntary Agencies in Rural Development (AVARD)
 - g. In the case of Zimbabwe,

3.5 Categories in Zimbabwe

In the case of Zimbabwe the Civic Society associations are categorized as:

1. Traditional associations based on tribal or ethnicity, for example, Zvinyawo groups, mutsyongoyo by the Ndauf of Chipinge and Chimanimani districts of Manicaland province.

2. Religious associations like the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Salvation Army, Reformed Church, Christ Church, Johanne Marange, Apostolic Church Mission and numerous others.
3. Social movements of various types:
 - a) movement focusing on governance like civic liberties campaigns, for example, Zimbabwe constitutional assembly, or anti-corruption campaigns,
 - c) Movements focusing on the needs of a particular group like women's groups, for example woza.
4. Membership associations of different types: namely,
 - 4.1 Representational like trade unions, communal organizations, for example, Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions [ZCTU].
 - 4.2 Professional like association of lawyers, doctors, nurses, for example, Zimbabwe legal society; Zimbabwe Association of Medical Practitioners, Zimbabwe Master Farmers Association, Zimbabwe Agricultural Society, Zimbabwe Commercial Farmers Union, and so on.
5. Intermediary associations of various types.

3.6 Place and role

The Civic Society Organizations (Voluntary or non-governmental organizations) play an important role in the welfare and development administration. The various dimensions of their role are:

1. They organize and mobilize the poor for socio-economic development.
2. They disseminate information and make the people aware of various schemes, programmes, and projects initiated by the Government for their betterment.
3. They facilitate the people's participation in administrative process.
4. They make the administrative machinery more sensitive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people
5. They impose a community system of accountability on the functioning of administrative machinery at lower levels. Thus, they reduce the scope of corruption.
6. They help the administrative machinery in indentifying the target groups.
7. They facilitate the usage of local resources for local development and thus make the communities self-reliant.
8. They create political consciousness among the people by discussing various political issues.
9. They act as the watch-dogs of the public interest
10. They strengthen the principle of self-help

Explanations

- However, it must be mentioned here that the role of voluntary agencies lies in supplementing the efforts of government and should not be competing with it.
- Milton Esman has identified four agencies of development viz., political system, administrative system, mass media, and voluntary organizations. He felt that the involvement of voluntary agencies in the developmental process has three merits, that is, a sense of solidarity, participation in decision-making and opportunity to interact with agencies of development including government.
- According to Raj Krishna, an eminent Indian economist and a former member of the planning commission, the voluntary agencies are superior to government agencies in three aspects:
 - a. Their workers can be more sincerely devoted to the task of reducing the sufferings of the poor than government staff,
 - b. They can have a better rapport with the rural poor than government staff, and
 - c. they can operate with greater flexibility as they are not bound by rigid bureaucratic rules and procedures.
- L. M. Prasad add two more points:
 - (a) their efforts are more economical than the government agencies, and
 - (b) they can motivate more public participation in development efforts than government agencies.

3.7 Limitations

However, the voluntary agencies in many countries, particularly African countries, are met with various limitations. Such limitations include:

1. Lack of sufficient financial resources
2. Lack of trained and professional workers

3. Bureaucratic non-cooperation and even resistance
4. Inadequate information base
5. Limited functional perspective (not holistic approach)
6. Political interference and influence
7. Resistance from local landlords, money-lenders and the like
8. Diverse socio-economic environment like casteism, communalism, poverty and so on.

- **Assessment**

Assessing the relative merits and demerits of voluntary sector, the World Development Report of 1997 observed, “that the voluntary sector not only brings its own strengths to the table, but also its own weaknesses. It does a lot of good work in increasing public awareness, voicing citizens’ concerns, and delivering services, because of their closeness to local concerns. But their concern is often for certain religious or ethnic groups and not the society as a whole. Their accountability is limited and their resources are often constrained.

- **Increasing awareness**

There is another factor in as far as African civic society is concerned. There is an increasing role of the civic society in bringing immense political and constitutional awareness among African communities in Southern Africa, in particular Zimbabwe. The civic society opposes authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is true that the civic society in both developed and developing countries is occupying an important place and its role is quite immense. In the case of Africa, the civic society is playing an impressive role in promoting awareness amongst the citizens, most particularly in breaking down the tendencies of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. And quite often there is an obvious clash between civic society associations and the government. Despite its financial limitations, civic society is playing an important role in promoting the tenets of democracy.

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