

# A Comparative Analysis of Civil Society and Democracy

V.L Chaka Hmar  
Ph. D Scholar,  
Department of Political Science,  
Mizoram University.

## ***Abstract***

Society is claimed to be as old as human species itself. In John Locke's metaphor, society exists before government. Humans live in a pre-political community under natural law. For the most part they cooperate and respect each other's rights, but they do perceive the need for a common judge and government or existence of civil society to protect against dangers. Therefore they contract among themselves to establish a government accountable to them, but retain the rights to change the government if it steps out of line. In a technological globalised era, a successful, inclusive and responsive democracy depends, to a large extent, on the existence of a vibrant, active and well informed civil society. Today the essential features of democracy are that citizens are sufficiently free in speech and assembly, for example to form competing political parties and that voters be able to choose among the candidates of these parties in regularly held elections. The development of civil society and the democratisation of the social and political spheres can be seen as a mutual process leading to political and economic stability. This paper examines and analyses the widely accepted meanings, elements and some of the major characteristics of both 'democracy' and 'civil' society' along with their role and interactive relationships in the democratic set up of government.

**Keywords:** Society, Democracy, Governance, Civil Society, Freedom, Development.

## **Introduction**

In today's world, democracy has gained widespread acceptance as a desirable form of government. Democracy in its functioning is closely associated with election, formation of government by political parties, judiciary, red-tapism with complicated bureaucratic rule and so on. Under this system there are various rights ranging from freedom of speech and expression, equality before law whereby various agents like pressure groups, interests groups that includes students' union, trade union, women's' right groups, civil society and the like were in existence. They play divergent but distinct roles in materialising and conditioning their causes or lots. Owing to various circumstances, Civil Society plays a laudable and indispensable role in socialising and developing the rational mindset upon the general masses or common citizens.

## **Meaning and Nature**

A phenomenon as complex and multifaceted as civil society invites a variety of definitions and attempts to capture its conceptual essence. Meaning of civil society has varied enormously across time and place. Even though the concept of civil society has become prominent in the social sciences, it remains somewhat unclear and even contested in terms of its actual meanings and uses. Ultimately, it may not be possible to develop a standard definition of civil society that would apply equally well to different settings. By contrast, an approach that views any conceptual definition as part, and indeed the outcome, of ongoing empirical efforts to understand civil society appears as the most fruitful strategy. In this sense, any definition of civil society will evolve over time, and neither can be regarded as given nor seen as something that can be imposed. Many different definitions of civil society exist, and there is little agreement on its precise meaning,

though much overlap exists among core conceptual components. Civil society is primarily about the role of both the state and the market relative to that of citizens and the society they constitute. The intellectual history of the term is closely intertwined with the notion of citizenship, the limits of state power, and the foundation as well as regulation of market economies.

In John Locke's metaphor, society exists before government. Humans live in a pre-political community under law. For the most part they cooperate and respect each other's rights, but they do perceive the need for a common judge and government to protect against troublemakers jeopardising life and property. Therefore they contract among themselves to establish government accountable to them, retaining rights to change the government if it steps out of line. From this metaphor come the conceptions of a self-directing society, a limited state and civil society as a source of resistance to the state.

For Montesquieu and Alexis de Tocqueville, the answer to the problem of limiting the absolutist state was to have a constitution defined in law and protected by a counterbalancing force of independent bodies. For Montesquieu these were the towns and estates of medieval Europe that were wealthy centres of independent activity holding extensive rights. For de Tocqueville they were local associations of citizens 'acting together in the affairs of daily life'. From the Montesquieu tradition, comes the conception of civil society engaged with politics, educating citizens, facilitating communications, and making government more effective.

According to Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba, the role of civil society is vital in democracy. The political elements of civil society organisations facilitate better awareness and more informed citizenry who make better voting choices, participate in politics and hold government to account better as a result. For Robert David Putnam, even non-political organisation in civil society is vital for democracy. Because they build social capital, trust and shared values, which are transferred to the political sphere and help to hold society together, facilitating an understanding of interconnectedness of society and interests within.

Civil society is composed of the totality of voluntary civil and social organisations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the force backed structures of a state and commercial institutions of the market. And civil society is using its power to influence the government policies as well as law making. At the backdrop of recent developments, the civil service is transformed from an advisory body to an influential body.

The term 'democracy' has been in use since ancient times in the west. Taken from the Greek word 'demos' which means 'the people'; 'cracy' stands for 'rule' or 'government' which therefore mainly indicates 'the rule of the people'. To Abraham Lincoln, 'democracy is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people'. In short, democracy as a form of government implies that the ultimate authority of the government is vested in the ordinary people so that public policy is made to conform to the will of the people and to serve the interest of the people. Under a democratic form of government, a civil society acts as an active participant to the betterment and effectiveness of the governance. At this juncture it may be argued that 'civil society' and 'democracy' are form of institutions wherein the former acts as supplementary or a check and laid the foundation for functioning of the lofty edifices of the latter.

The proper and untiring functioning of the civil society has contributed for the inclusiveness of the democratic governance. The literatures on the relations between civil society and democratic political society have their roots in early liberal writings like those of Alexis de Tocqueville. However they were developed in significant ways by 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists like Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who identified the role of political culture in a democratic order as vital. They argued that the political element of many voluntary organizations facilitates better awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and hold government more accountable as a result.

The liberal democracy works on certain principles and certain mechanism and the principles or nature of liberal democracy include the following:

i). Government by consent: Democracy is government by consent of people. Rational consent can be obtained by persuasion for which an atmosphere of free discussion is essential. Any regime where the consent of the people is sought to be obtained without freedom of expression of divergent opinions, does not qualify for being called a 'democracy' even if it maintains certain democratic institutions.

ii). Public accountability: Liberal Democracy must constantly remains answerable to the people who created it. John Locke who thought of government as a 'trustee' of the power vested in it by the people for the protection of their natural right to life, liberty and property, nevertheless, felt that it could not be fully trusted. He wanted the people to remain constantly vigilant.

iii). Majority Rule:

Democracy in operation provides that the decisions are taken in several bodies viz., legislature, committee, cabinet and executive or regulative bodies. Majority Rules means that in all these decision making bodies the issues are to be resolved by voting with an aim to operationalise the will of the majority.

iv). Recognition of minority Rights: The principle of majority by no means implies the suppression of minorities. Minority may faces with grievances as such as psychological insults over discrimination in housing, education and employment etc., which are, at the best extent, protected.

v). Constitutional Government: Constitutional government means a 'government by laws' rather than by men. Democracy requires an infinitely complex machinery of processes, procedures and institutions to translate the majority will into action. Therefore, a well established tradition of law and constitution are a must for the stability of a democratic government.

The champion of liberal democracy recognises certain institutions and procedures as essential characteristics of democracy. The presence and absence of these characteristics will determine whether a system is democratic or not. They firmly believe that a government can be conducted according to the will of the people only by adherence to these institutions and procedure. The main characteristics of democracy may be enumerated as under:

- i). More than one political party freely competing for political power.
- ii). Political officials not confined to any privileged class.
- iii). Periodic elections based on universal adult franchise.
- iv). Protection of civil liberties.
- v). Independent of the judiciary.

In the light of this regard, it may be added that when there is a free competition between more than one political party for power, the people get an opportunity to consider various alternative policies, programmes and personalities to exercise their choice. The former Soviet Union and the present People's Republic of China cannot be treated as democracies as they conceded monopoly of power to their respective Communist Parties. Periodic election requires that the people's representatives should be chosen for a limited period so that the party that comes to power is able to implement its policy and programme. And freedom of the people cannot be secured in the face of concentration of governmental powers in any organ. Therefore, liberal democracy insists on the separation of powers between different organs of government.

In a democracy, civil society groups have respect for the law, for the rights of the individuals and other groups to express their interests and opinions. Together state, market, and civil society constitute the entirety of a society, and the relations between these components determine the character of a society and its structure.

Between 1750 and 1850, ideas about civil society took a new and fundamental turn in response to a perceived crisis in the ruling social order. This crisis was motivated by the rise of the market economy and the increasing differentiation of interests as 'communities of strangers' replaced 'communities of neighbours'. In contrast to Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes, the thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed civil society as a defence against unwarranted intrusions by the state on newly realised individual rights and freedoms, organised through the medium of voluntary association. In this school of thought, civil society was a self regulating universe of associations committed to the same ideals that needed to be protected from the state in order to preserve its role resisting despotism.

In this regard, a highly articulated civil society with overlapping memberships was seen as the foundation of a stable democratic polity, a defence against domination by anyone group, and a barrier to anti-democratic forces.

Civil Society whether liberals or Marxist must take into account the following features:

- i). Civil Society is the public sphere of society. And it is the location of these processes by which the experiences of individuals and communities, discussions, affirmation and the public are negotiated. It is rather a site where the state is forbidden to shape public opinion and perceptions.
- ii). Democratic norms and processes have to be imbibed in the social order.
- iii). The State power must be controlled and it has to become responsive through democratic practices of an independent civil society.

Civil Society stands for the development, empowerment or improvement of the masses as a whole. Some of the major roles of civil society in building and strengthening of democracy are discussed as under:

- i). The strength of the civil society have a positive influence on the state and the market. It is therefore seen as an increasing important agent for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability and so on.
- ii). Civil society under operation enables the hitherto voiceless and unrecognised communities' interests to be represented. In other words, civil society has a goal of empowerment for local communities.
- iii). Civil society has further the credibility of 'good governance' by policy analysis and as participants in the design of strategies and by regulation and monitoring of state performance and the action and behaviour of public officials. Moreover, civil society helps realisation of good governance by building social capital and enabling citizen to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices and so on.
- iv). Civil society has a role of 'ensuring the accountability of the state in different spheres. As it has the monitoring function of holding the law and order machinery accountable. This function implies the control of political parties and electoral process, the control of local bodies.

Civil society has been used in various ways from culture to culture and vice versa. For American Scholar Civil society is projected as an answer to anomie, for Europeans as an answer to interventionist government, and in India as a possible way toward plural democracy. After all civil society is associated with such movement or organisation of communities to help speeded up mobilisation, socialisation on the part of common people, and to make responsive and vigilant citizenry.

The conceptual literature on civil society is richly suggestive of possible relationships with democracy. However, the social science literature on civil society is not as developed as the political theory, but significant studies are now appearing. Robert Putnam's 'Making Democracy Work' concluded from a variety of statistical and historical studies that civil society makes democratic government more effective.



Against the foregoing discussions, it is of worth mentioning that civil society exists in the state under democratic government or the latter integrates the former two. The claims of the state get strengthened by civil society and civil society is made more stable through the state. In a democratic system, state and civil society can collaborate for effective functioning of each. In this regard, civil society has to be more open and diversified. It has to keep the dialogue continuous and constant with the state and within all constituent making it.

In liberal democratic states, there is a constant interplay of forces belonging to the state and civil society, each putting an imprint on the other. In dictatorial regimes, state power is used to control civil society and civil society gets integrated into the state as the state speaks for the society. However, democracy alone unites the state with civil society. Thus, civil society cannot exist unless it is democratically structured and functions accordingly. Owing to such conditions, it may be argued that a democratic state cannot exist if it does not provide the civil society frame in perfect order, and it cannot exist if it does not guarantee rights and freedom to individuals.

### **Conclusion**

A democratic civil society cannot exist if it does not allow every individual to act in the public sphere, it cannot exist if each and every citizen does not have equal claim on the state, if each citizen is not respected as a human being. Civil society and democracy or democratic system stood in relation to each other, each giving another a corresponding value. With the emergence of political economy and liberalism, civil society got a definite connotation, especially in relation to the state. Thus, it may be noted that state or democratic government and civil society are closely related to each other. The former cannot be imagined without the latter and similarly the latter cannot be thought of without the existence of the former. As a matter of fact, in democratic systems of government, the state protects the civil society, whereas in dictatorial regimes, the state wielded control over the civil society. After all, by conducting an analytical examination between democracy and civil society, it is clearly brought home that they are integrating and function side by side with each other. Without civil society, government and administration are rudderless. Hence, successful civil society makes successful government especially that of democratic forms of government.

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