

Contribution of civil society and media to democracy politics essay



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The mass media and an active civil society are two important ingredients in a strong and healthy democracy. The aim of this paper is to analyse how media and civil society are the ways to enhance democratic governance. Without free media and an active civil society, there is space for enormous and unchecked political power leading to corruption and anti-democratic behaviour by government officials. In a consolidated democracy, both the media and civil society need one another. There cannot be an active civil society without a free media. The two always have to complement one another in order for democracy to flourish.

When one speaks about democratic governance, the reference is to the citizens' right to increased participation and initiative in government policy-making, giving citizens the power to check the government and thus make elected officials and civil servants accountable. Civil society groups such as Non-Government Organisations, political and social foundations, diverse interest-based movements help to create an atmosphere of consensus and dialogue, thus consolidating democracy. The free media has its important role in all this since it enables dialogue to take place and make government more accountable as well as bridging the gap between government officials and the citizens. All this turns the notion of 'big government' on its head.

In this paper, a case study will be analysed in order to prove how much important it is to have a free media and an active, vibrant civil society in order to achieve a consolidated democracy where society's rights are fully respected by those in power.

Part One: The Media and Democratic Governance

The most important underlying criterion for achieving democratic and accountable governance is the media. It is important that the media be free so scrutiny of whoever is in government is exercised. In this part, the various important positive effects of having a free media will be listed and analysed.

The importance of having a free and independent media is also found in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which clearly states that to be free to express your opinion there has to be freedom of information “ to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (The Financial Gazette, 6th October 2010)” This already shows how the right to access information freely compliments freedom of expression and that this helps in establishing a flourishing civil society thus making room more for more accountable and democratic governance.

The most significant benefit of a free media is having public access to information. When the public has access to information, it can be able to make more rational decisions because it is constantly being informed and this has an effect on the government because there is a pressure point on the elected officials to be more responsive to the aspirations of the wider society which put them in government (USAID, June 1999: 5). So the media becomes one the checks and balances that are found in Western democracies. The implications of this boil down to the fact that civil society is greatly empowered and no government official will be foolish enough to ignore such a scenario. So, one can observe how the media can serve as a linking factor between the government and the citizens.

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Another important contribution by the media is in increasing the accountability of government. The media is very important when it comes to exposing abuses committed by members of the government especially when other institutions choose remain silent (UN website: 5). This is very beneficial since the public is always being informed and this helps very much in fighting corruption. A state which does not have an independent media is more prone to abuses of power by its leaders and institutions. The Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen emphasized how a free press and access to information lead to a healthy and rational discussion which will in turn lead to better policies and good governance as well as also fight abuses of power such as corruption (UN website: 5). Again, the fact that civil society's empowerment is due to the presence of a free media cannot be more clear. There is certainly less room for government officials to be corrupt and secretive and with the free media, and the citizens are more included in decision-making once they are always being informed (The Financial Gazette, 6th October 2010).

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the role of the media is to give a voice to those who do not have one and this is in order to enable them to take part in the wider society and this would lead to the achievement of consensus (UN website: 6). So the media's role in disseminating information and fostering debate are essential in strengthening civil society and ensure democratic governance.

Internet and Democracy

Nowadays, in the established Western democracies, there is the internet phenomenon which is being a strong contributor to making democracy a <https://assignbuster.com/contribution-of-civil-society-and-media-to-democracy-politics-essay/>

more direct process. It is bringing the citizens closer to government giving them a greater voice on various topics and a space where they can raise their concerns (Simon et al, 2002: 1). A new term e-democracy has emerged bringing with it a more participatory democracy. However, one should not exclude the fact that the Internet is also used by people who are sworn enemies to democracy. A current example would be Islamic fundamentalists who can use the internet to recruit sympathizers from the wealthy and advanced Western democracies with huge consequences.

Overall, the free media is a very important contributor to a healthy democracy as it keeps people informed and allows them to listen to differing views too as well as giving the space for civil society to express itself. In the next part, the analysis will be on the role civil society plays to achieve democratic governance.

Part Two: Civil Society and Democratic Governance

Apart from the free media, civil society contributes to achieving democratic governance. This is seen in the Western states. In Part One, the emphasis was on how the media contributes to achieving a consolidated democracy and how the two need to complement one another to have a healthy functioning democracy. In this part, the emphasis shall be on how civil society helps keep a government close to the people's aspirations and increase accountability of elected politicians. Nowadays, both sides of the political spectrum agree that civil society is a powerful check on government.

One has to start off by giving a definition of civil society. The third President of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson gave a clear definition of civil society;

“ I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but inform their discretion” (Changing the Present)

Thomas Jefferson.

This quotation refers to many aspects of modern civil society. It points out to the empowerment of the citizens in the politics and governance of a state. Here, empowerment of the citizens means that they are more involved in policy-making and the government would be more accountable to the very same citizens who elected it. Jefferson's quotation implies that the citizens are the best agents in checking the elected officials. The question is from where this power comes. This power comes from the media, hence the importance of the media in creating a vibrant civil society. The free media empowers the citizens with information.

This is characteristic of the advanced democracies of the Western states. The emphasis is on civil society and its role in policy-making. A case study would be the European Union which promotes the involvement of civil society. The European Commission believes in the power of civil society which helps to foster accountability of government and make democracy healthier (Maloney and Van Deth, 2008: 4). Here, as in advanced Western

democracies, civil society is made up of numerous Non-Government
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Organizations (NGO's) as well as many foundations and movements, and citizen-based initiatives (Maloney and Van Deth, 2008: 4). The European Commission believes that such a civil society can help to reduce the 'democratic deficit' that many in the European Union complain about. The majority of the EU policymakers as well as many from both the Left-wing and the Right-wing of the political spectrum share the conviction that civil society is the best method to help empower the citizens and that the future governance of the European Union should be based on giving civil society a more direct role (Maloney and Van Deth, 2008: 5). That is the best way to reduce the gap that exists between the citizens and the decision-makers. Thomas Jefferson's quotation about civil society cannot fit better.

Another contribution of civil society to democratic governance is acting as a check and balance on the government to ensure that there are no excesses by people in power (ZEF Bonn, January 2005). This is a very important because it makes the government more accountable to the citizens which elected it.

Civil Society Organisations (CSO's) such as NGO's and voluntary organisations are also very important. A great contribution is that policies become more efficient and inclusive. People working in such organisations have a high expertise in the topic they work on and this helps to make policies more beneficial to the public (European Citizens Association, 29th March 2002). This is a pressure point on the government because it is its duty to give the citizens a better quality of life and by maintaining the dialogue with the very same organisations that represent the interests of society, its policies would be more beneficial.

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This is the post-modern style of doing politics in the Western democracies and it has to be said that the European Union is the leading exemplary project in promoting this new way of doing things.

Case Study: Civil Society Organisations in Egypt

As a case study of the importance of civil society to democracy, the focus will be on the Civil Society Organisations (CSO's) in Egypt and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian society.

Under Nasser, there was a period of suppression while under Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, there has been slight liberalisation. CSO's in Egypt cover a range of areas from Muslim Brotherhood to feminist activists. They are constant critics of Mubarak and his regime. A case in point was in October 2009, when various CSO's and activists in Egypt protested against the arrest of people such as academics and artists due to their critical views of the government (Human Rights Brief, 11th November 2009). The protests were against *hesba* cases, which are accusations of having insulted God and Muslims only can file them. The protesters claimed *hesbas* were politically motivated to intimidate critics of the Mubarak regime.

Compared to other Muslim countries, in Egypt there is quite a number of academics and civil society groups vying for influence. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, an academic has the view that the strengthening of civil society in the form of voluntary organisations is the best way to foster democracy in the Arab countries (Beinin et al, 1997: 52).

Civil society organisations in Egypt range from religious to educational to cultural to charity ones and they operate under a set of laws. Some engage <https://assignbuster.com/contribution-of-civil-society-and-media-to-democracy-politics-essay/>

in activities to help the poor especially in Muslim feasts such as Eid al-Adha (BBC News, 27th November 2009). The law in Egypt allows for four types of CSO's which are; Non-Government Non-Profit Organisations which do charity work, Professional Associations, Trade Unions and Business associations (ZEF Bonn, January 2005). Trade unions are still controlled by the government which allows a union for each sector but does not allow the setting up of independent trade unions and has suppressed strikes (Beinin et al, 1997: 57). However, due to the economic liberalisation that the Egyptian government has initiated, there can still be hope for the trade unions to strengthen civil society (Beinin et al, 1997: 58). The professional associations, on the other hand are respected and examples of them include the Bar Association which has been a leading voice in favour of human rights (Beinin et al, 1997: 58). The business associations began emerging after the 1970's economic liberalisation and they have been gaining in influence due to their well-established economic connections (ZEF Bonn, January 2005).

However, civil society in Egypt and all the agencies that represent it are still relatively weak. Reason for include the Egyptian government's efforts to stifle these agencies and the lack of organisation of these CSO's. Firstly, the Mubarak regime has enacted laws for the four main types of CSO's listed above and through these laws, it does all its best to keep the CSO's weak (ZEF Bonn, January 2005). Secondly, there is the problem of the lack of organisation in the CSO's themselves. The leaders have most power in these organisations and they are not bottom-up i. e. giving the members the chance to use their skills for the organisations (ZEF Bonn, January 2005). As a result, the CSO's cannot be fully organised institutions.

Though the CSO's in Egypt are not well-organised they have achieved limited successes too such as succeeding in pushing through economic legislation (ZEF Bonn, January 2005). But now, they are gradually moving to other areas such as governance and judicial reform (ZEF Bonn, January 2005). The globalisation mentality also helps to keep these organisations alive in Egypt.

The CSO's in Egypt use various methods in order to be influential. These methods consist of an NGO being involved with Members of Parliament in Parliamentary Committees, uniting membership of NGO's with political parties to give civil society a greater say, media such as newspapers and television, business associations disseminating information, open seminars and NGO's uniting together in demonstrations.

However, although civil society organisations in Egypt are quite active compared to other Islamic countries, civil society is still at its early phase. It still cannot be compared to the civil societies of the Western democracies. The state in Egypt is still powerful while the society is still weak and the CSO's still have problems in the way they function and are organised.

Conclusion

As pointed out in this research, the media and civil society both need one another in order to have a healthy democracy. The media serves to give the citizens the much needed knowledge in order to help them scrutinize their government leading to increased accountability. The globalisation phenomenon promotes this principle of civil society and there are many organisations in countries throughout the world working to achieve such an advanced level of democracy, in some countries under difficult

circumstances. This brings us to the case of civil society organisations (CSO's) in Egypt. There are many academics, students and activists working for more democratic Egypt but there is still interference by the ruling party as well as a lack of proper organisation in these CSO's. However, the potential for these organisations to be catalysts of democratisation is there, though it will take time. Egypt's case study shows however, that civil society is an important link between the government and the citizens.