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CHAPTER 10

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN ASIA

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Introduction

One of the often-raised questions concerning democratization and democratic consolidation is whether the elites or the public make and consolidate democracy. The role of elites in creating democracy has been emphasized in many studies. Likewise for democratic consolidation, which, as one study suggests, depends on the emergence of a unified elitist group that commits itself to democratic rule.[1] Nevertheless, what has happened in Asia in recent years suggests that one cannot overlook the contribution of the public masses to democratization and democratic consolidation. In Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand, without the participation of the masses or civil society, democratization would not have been achieved. Although their role was only supportive, it lent popular weight to the democratic transition and helped deepen democracy. As these countries now consolidate their democracy, it is interesting to note to what extent civil society has contributed to the process.

What is civil society?

The concept of civil society is rather ambiguous and means different things to different people. As Lehmbruch puts it, "Quite often, when 'civil society' is used in the political literature or the media, it is no longer clear what exactly the respective author has in mind. The denotations of 'civil society' have undergone significant changes over time and in different national contexts. As a consequence, the meaning of the concept in the contemporary discourse is fraught with considerable ambiguity"[2]. At any rate, the concept of civil society is now accepted in modern political science as an intermediary between the private sector and the state. Thus, civil society is distinguished from the state and economic society, which includes profit-making enterprises. Nor is it the same as family-life society. Civil society, as Larry Diamond defines it, is "the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary,

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[1] Larry Diamond, *Development Democracy: Toward Consolidation,* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 218.

[2] Gerhard Lehmbruch, "Germany", in Yamamoto Tadashi, ed., *Governance and Civil Society in a Global Age*, Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2001, p. 230.

bound by a legal order or set of shared rules."[3] Civil society involves private citizens acting collectively to make demands to the state or to express in the public sphere their interests, preferences and ideas or to check the authority of the state and make it accountable. With this in mind, civil society may encompass a wide range of organizations concerned with public matters. They include civic, issue-oriented, religious, and educational interest groups and associations. Some are known as non-governmental organizations, or NGOs; some are informal and loosely structured.[44]

Civil Society and Democratization

In the democratization of Asian countries, notably South Korea, Indonesia, The Philippines and Thailand, the role of elites' was pre-eminent, but would not have been achieved without the active participation of civil society organizations. They generated political pressure for reform, leading to the liberalizing of political systems and eventually bringing down dictatorial regimes. In Thailand, the economic success of the 1980s and early 1990s gave strength to the middle class and led to demands for more openness, political liberalization and democratization. Thailand had been known as a strong state. State institutions, especially the bureaucracy and the military, had played an eminent political role in slowing the development of societal organizations and interest groups. Nevertheless, because of rapid economic growth, the business sector, the urban middle class, and civil society organizations were strengthened. Several issue-oriented organizations including the Confederation for Democracy and environmental groups sprang up to stimulate democratic aspirations among the urban middle class and to fight for democratization. In addition, the semi-democratic government of Prime Minister Prem Tinasulanond (1980-1988) had facilitated the growth of political parties and helped legitimize participatory institutions. His rule accelerated the decline of the military's political role. Although it made a comeback in 1991, the military had to withdraw from politics within a year because of fierce resistance by the urban middle class led by the Confederation of Democracy and other political groups.[5]

After 1992, the strength of civil society organizations continued to grow and is reflected in their success in campaigning for political reform in the late 1990s. The democratization that began in 1992 did not lead to a stable, incorruptible democratic government. Political parties remained weak and fragmented. Political corruption, including vote buying and other forms of electoral fraud was on the rise. Civil-society organizations responded by launching campaigns for further political reform and a new constitution. An organization called Pollwatch was set up in 1992 by then Prime Minister Anand Punyarachun to monitor elections. The Confederation for Democracy spearheaded the campaign and captured public support. The urban middle class had already been unhappy with the growing political corruption and government instability. Eventually, the new Constitution was promulgated in October 1997, marking a significant step toward political reform and democratization.

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[3] Diamond, op. cit., p. 221.
[4] Ibid., p. 222.
[5] Suchit Bunbongkarn, "Thailand's Successful Reforms", *Journal of Democracy,* October 1999, p 57.

In the Philippines, democratization occurred without economic growth. The strength of civil society and the democratic consciousness that had been firmly ingrained in the Philippine public helped bring down the dictatorial rule of Ferdinand Marcos. The mobilization of hundreds of thousands of citizens to reclaim the stolen 1986 election through the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL)—set up to monitor the election—forced Marcos out of power. Without NAMFREL's strength, Marco's massive election fraud would not have been documented and publicized and the mobilization would not have been possible.[6] In addition, the strength of civil society helped maintain democratic rule throughout the term of President Corazon Aquino, who survived several coup attempts. Civil society flexed its muscles again in the successful campaign to oust Joseph Estrada for corruption.

In Indonesia, democratization was made possible through socio-economic changes that included the rise of the middle class and the expansion of civil society. Wider access to education was another impetus. These were the results of economic growth. As Donald Emmerson points out, economic growth in Indonesia during the Suharto era facilitated polycentrism in society, making political monopoly by those in power impossible.[7] This polycentrism was characterized by the rise of civil society organizations, the growth of ethnic groups and public consciousness. Although economic growth under the Suharto's New Order had helped legitimize his regime, especially during the 1980s, by the 1990s this economic success had exposed the expanding middle class to the foreign values such as democracy. The New Order was established to lend legitimacy to the military-dominated government in the name of political stability and economic development. But the expanding urban middle class and ethnic groups empowered by economic success were increasing critical of Suharto's authoritarian government. Violent clashes with the government became increasingly common.[8] On the eve of the 1997-98 economic crisis, Indonesian society had become more complex and the people's changing attitudes were no longer consistent with the New Order.

The economic crisis led to Suharto's downfall and the establishment of democratic rule. The environmental changes favoring democratization mentioned earlier did not automatically or immediately lead to democracy. Had the economic crisis not occurred, Suharto's downfall would have been prolonged. Despite much evidence of his corruption, nepotism and inefficiency, he continued to survive for some time. But the rupiah's downfall, the economic crash, the collapse of financial institutions, and Suharto's inability to cope with the disasters had deligitimized his rule.[9] A discredited Suharto was finally forced to resign.

In South Korea, the role of civil society in fostering democratic transition was reflected in a series of student and worker demonstrations against authoritarian rule and demanding liberalization and democratization during the latter part of the 1980s. The middle class also exerted strong pressure for true democratic change. The

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[6] Diamond, op. cit., p. 235.
[7] Donald Emmerson, "A Tale of Three Countries" *Journal of Democracy*, October 1999, p. 38.
[8] *Far Eastern Economic Review,* February 15, 1996, p. 21.
[9] Emmerson, op. cit., p. 44.

strength of the middle class, students and workers was the result of South Korean success in economic development and industrialization. The South Korean middle class and workers were traditionally compliant and reserved. Only the students were politically active and had demonstrated previously against the authoritarian regime. But after a long period of economic growth, the attitudes of the middle class, labor, and civil society groups became less tolerant of repressive rule. The mobilization of a civil society coalition of student and labor organizations, journalists, writers, academics, religious groups, and peasants against the authoritarian regime of Chun Doo-hwan weakened his rule. The government responded with further repression, resulting in an explosion of labor and student unrest. Chun's legitimacy was gone and his close associate, Roh Tae-woo broke ranks with the regime. These events gave Chun no choice except to comply with the public demands to establish full democracy with direct election of the president.[10]

Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation

In these emerging democracies, one of the challenges facing them is how to make democratic consolidation possible. Democracies in Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand are still weak, vulnerable and inefficient. They need to be strengthened and consolidated. The question is: how can civil society contribute to the democratic consolidation in those emerging democracies?

What is democratic consolidation? Democracy is consolidated when a reversal to authoritarianism is impossible. For some, democracy is consolidated when it is made stable, vibrant, efficient and accountable. At any rate, it is a complex process and the factors contributing to democratic consolidation include structural and cultural dimensions.

First of all, commitment to democracy among the elites is an essential condition for consolidating democracy. Democracy cannot take hold if the elites are not committed to democracy and do not have faith in democratic principles. These elites include top decision-makers, organizational leaders, politicians, top government officials, intellectuals, leaders in the private sector, and opinion shapers. Their commitment to democracy will make a reversal to an authoritarian rule difficult, if not impossible. If the elites split in their political beliefs and a large number favor authoritarianism, a reversal to authoritarian rule is possible. However, the elites' belief in democracy is not enough; they must act in accordance with democratic norms. For instance, if they resort to restrictions on political participation and freedom in order to maintain their political supremacy, this cannot be seen as a commitment to democracy.

Second, at the level of the mass public, democracy is consolidated when a majority of the people believes that democracy is the best form of government and is suitable for that particular time. In emerging democracies, this belief is not firmly entrenched in the public mind. As a result, some groups are often encouraged and manipulated into using violence or other nondemocratic methods in fighting for their cause.

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[10] Diamond, op, cit., p. 235-236.

Third, the commitment to democracy by organizations and groups is also essential for consolidating democracy. Political parties, social movements, civil society organizations, interest groups, and other social organizations can play an important role in strengthening and deepening democracy. They can serve as a mechanism for political participation and mobilization, disseminating democratic principles and norms.

Civil society organizations can help consolidate democracy in a number of ways. As Diamond points out, civil society can play a role in checking, monitoring and restraining the exercise of power by the state and holding it accountable.[11] This function can reduce political corruption, which is pervasive in emerging democracies. It can force the government to be more accountable, transparent, and responsive to the public, which strengthens its legitimacy.

Civil-society organizations can play a vital role in making the elites and the mass public more committed to democracy by disseminating democratic principles and ideas. Organizations that are involved specifically in the protection of civil rights and freedoms, as well as political reform, can be particularly important in this regard.

Another role civil-society organizations play in consolidating democracy is by stimulating political participation. In several emerging democracies, voluntary political participation is not always high. Political indifference and apathy are may slow down the consolidation process. Civil-society organizations can supplement the role of political parties in encouraging people to get involved in politics, especially as voters in elections. Political participation strengthens the legitimacy and the institutionalization of democratic government, which are essential for consolidation.[12]

Civil society's role in empowering the people is well recognized. Civil-society organizations in many democracies perform the function of representing the interests and asserting the rights and power of the people. In several new democracies such as Indonesia and Thailand, many interest groups are loosely organized and unable to articulate their interests. Civil-society organizations can come in and help interest groups and people to fight more effectively for their interests, thereby empowering them.[13]

Civil-society organizations also can train future political leaders. Those who are involved in the activities of such groups learn how to organize and motivate people, publicize programs, reconcile conflicts and build alliances. This teaches people to deal efficiently with political challenges and can mold competent political leaders.[14]

Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Asia

In Thailand, one of the major challenges facing the country is how to consolidate democracy. Thai civil society had been successful in democratizing the political system and forcing certain reform programs including the enactment of the 1997 constitution. But in the area of democratic consolidation, civil-society organizations have not done much. During the Chuan administration (1998-2000), some civil

[11] Ibid., p. 239-240.
[12] Ibid., p. 242.
[13] Ibid., p. 244.
[14] Ibid., p. 245.

groups, notably the Assembly of the Poor, organized farmers demonstrations and protests against state power to achieve social justice. Nonetheless, when Thaksin Shinawatra came to power in January 2001, the state had become stronger again. His government has launched populist policies, for example, providing practically free medical service to everyone, giving money to every village to set up a village fund, and declaring a debt moratorium for farmers. His policies should in principle strengthen civil society and hence democratic consolidation. But since the government also has put restrictions on press freedom, shown intolerance toward criticism and dissent, and co-opted some press and civic groups, civil society is coming under increasing government control and there is concern that Thailand will move from a liberal democracy back to merely an electoral democracy.

In Indonesia, the democratic government continues to be weak. President Megawati Sukarnoputri has been unable to create a stable and effective democratic government. The party system is still fragmented and unable to produce stable support for the government and make the government more responsive to the needs of the people. Indonesian civil society continues to be fragmented. Ethnic and religious conflict continues to pose a dangerous threat to national integration. There is no strong and efficient civil society to pull the people and societal groups together. In fact, the problems facing democratic consolidation in Indonesia are too complicated to be dealt with by any civil society organization. Democratic consolidation in Indonesia depends perhaps primarily on political leadership, the political party system, and the military. What Indonesia needs is capable political leaders who can reconcile conflicts among various ethnic and religious groups. Political parties need to develop to be more effective at producing support for government. At the same time the military should avoid the temptation to take over the government. Although Indonesian democracy is not firmly entrenched, its still carries popular legitimacy and a mass uprising is likely if the military acted to reverse the democratic trend.

Philippines civil society showed it was strong enough to force Estrada to step down, another example of the active monitoring of the performance of state and political leaders by Philippine social groups. However, the Philippine state is still weak and unable to assert its autonomy from powerful business and societal groups. The commitment to democracy by Philippine elites and the mass public is unquestioned. But Philippine democracy cannot truly become entrenched until a viable and vibrant civil society develops that can counterbalance the state, as well as influential business and societal groups that want to dominate the state.

In the case of South Korea, the economic crisis of 1997 accelerated the democratic transformation in the sense that the authoritarian developmental state was put under scrutiny and the government monopoly of the public cause was challenged.[15] Civil-society organizations became recognized as a "third power" when the crisis of 1997 destroyed middle-class confidence in political leadership, causing civic groups to become stronger and more critical of the establishment. Korean civil society has empowered the people, making them more assertive in the political arena.

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[15] Jung Ku-hyun and Kim In-choon, "Republic of Korea", in Yamamoto, op. cit., p. 59.

Hence their voice is now heard more often. But there are problems to be overcome if civil-society organizations are to be more effective at representing public opinions. They need to be more open for broad participation by ordinary people. At present, most are dominated by the elite. Such organizations also must be financially independent and able to resist co-optation by politicians or big business. Financial independence does not mean that civil-society organizations cannot accept financial support from the government or other agencies, but there should be no strings attached.

Conclusion

Civil society has an important role to play in consolidating democracy. It needs to be autonomous and able to resist manipulation by the state and business interests. A strong and reliable civil society can represent the interests of the people and the community and serve as a check on the use of power by the state. There are signs of an increasing strength and assertiveness in civil society in the democracies in Asia. It will be stronger, more autonomous and play a meaningful role for democratic consolidation in the future. Civil-society organizations will be more active in stimulating the political awareness of the mass public and encouraging their political participation to protect their own interests. Through these efforts, governments can become more accountable and responsive to the people's needs, and the elites and the mass public will be more committed to democracy. Hence, democratic consolidation will be achieved.

The governments in Asian democracies can accelerate the development of civil society. Instead of using a corporatist model to co-opt civil society and restrict its autonomy, states can provide assistance to civil-society organizations to perform their functions more effectively. This assistance should be in form of financial support and training of personnel. In addition, civil society's autonomy should not be violated. The governments should not be afraid of free civil society since it encourages governments to be more honest, accountable, transparent and responsive to the public demands, which will win the support of the people and strengthen their legitimacy.