**Forum:** Special Committee on Securing and Advancing Democracy 2  

**Issue:** The role of civil society in advancing democracy  

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**Position:** President Chair  

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**Introduction**

The idea of civil society was born thousands of years ago thanks to Aristotle. Ever since its role has been to help create democracies but also to keep them intact and functioning. Civil society is considered one of the strongest voices in democracy and the one who holds the most power in the decision making in many countries. However, civil society, in some parts of the world does not remain stable or even have a say in a given political regime. Indeed over the past few years, we have seen a decline in the power that civil society holds. It is therefore imperative that solutions to this decline of social power are found. To obtain once again the balance between the citizens and the governments for a more equal and just democracy.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Civil Society**

The paradox about civil society is that it covers a vast range of activities - yet it is very hard to define. A way to describe it is as a public space between the state, the market and the ordinary household, in which people can debate and tackle action. Ernest Gellner, a Civil Society Theorist, observed that “civil society is that set of diverse nongovernmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating atomizing the rest of society”.

**Democracy**

Democracy, from “demos” which means “common people and “kratos” which means “rule or strength”, is a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.
Political organizations

A political organization is any organization that involves itself in the political process, including political parties, non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, and special interest groups. Political organizations are those engaged in political activities aimed at achieving clearly-defined political goals, which typically benefit the interests of their members.

Social Capital

Social capital is a positive product of human interaction. The impersonal relationships, institutions, and other social assets of a society that can be used to gain advantage. The positive outcome may be tangible or intangible and may include useful information, innovative ideas, and future opportunities. In business terms, social capital is the contribution to an organization's success that can be attributed to personal relationships and networks, both within the organization and outside of it.

General Overview

Throughout the general overview, all the information is based upon the book and documents of Larry Diamond, Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution.

The importance of civil society in a democracy

The strength and pluralism of civil society, and its ability to unite in a broad front, has been a crucial factor for shaping democratic change, according to Larry Diamond, a Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution. L. Diamond states that «civil society performs many other crucial functions for democratic development and consolidation.» These functions include: limiting the power of the state more generally, including challenging the abuses of authority; monitoring human rights and strengthening the rule of law; monitoring elections and enhancing the overall quality and credibility of the democratic process; educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities; building a culture of tolerance and civic involvement; incorporating marginal groups into the political process and enhancing the latter's responsiveness to societal interest and need; providing alternative means, outside the state, for communities to raise their level of material development; opening and pluralizing the flows of information; and building a constituency for economic as well as political reforms.

L. Diamond also explains that “where civil society organizations build up credibility and trust among various political actors, they may be able to stabilize, even save, democracy in time of crisis”. For example, he describes a situation in the Central African Republic, where an NGO, the Central African League for Human Rights (LCDH), played a crucial mediating role during two Army uprisings in 1996.
During the first Army mutiny, LCDH officials played the chief mediating role between the military mutineers and the government “drafting protocols (to provide soldiers their back pay) and ultimately persuading soldiers to lay down their arms.” A second, more serious, uprising took the form of a military coup attempt, threatened democracy which could eventually cause civil war with its ethnic overtones, internal military divisions, distribution of arms, demands for the resignation of the president and looting and terrorizing of the civilian population. Although this uprising was ultimately put down by French military intervention, the political resolution, which saw the society rally behind democracy, was catalyzed by the LCDH's declared support for the regime and its mediation of negotiations between the regime and the military rebels.

The ability of the LCDH to perform this democracy-saving role owed to the “consistent neutrality and objectivity” and widespread image of “moral credibility” it had established during the country's previous five years of democratic struggle.

Countries experience different challenges during democratic transitions. In nearly all cases, civil society organizations may do much to keep the quest for democracy alive, as well as, raise the consciousness of society, and even contain the abuses of the regime (in part by exposing and documenting them). In the face of continual pressure, intimidation - even arrest and physical danger - human rights groups and other civic organizations have courageously pressed on with the struggle for democracy.

The democratic force of civil society

Civil society encompasses most of a democratic country’s population. It is you and I, non-elected people - students, members of clubs, associations, churches, and sports teams. In highly authoritarian countries, however, the lines between government and civil society are blurred. There are well-known situations where civil society (that is, entities not connected to the government) barely exists at all.

Looking at the history of democratic development on the African continent, for example, L. Diamond warns that one of the greatest threats to democracy has been the intense politicization of social life. The state has been so central and pervasive in distributing what people want that every major group has wanted desperately to obtain access to or control over it. Virtually all major groups (political and civil) have been oriented to what they could get from the political system, rather than to make it work fairly. What is vitally needed in these circumstances is some neutral, trusted umpires and monitors whose commitment is unequivocal to the process, not to any particular outcome, party, faction group or leader.

When this is the case, the government is tasked to provide or control most or all services to its constituents, a daunting task even for the richest of countries. Inevitably, resources are limited and
people often have to settle for nothing or something that is less than what they want or need, but what the government is able to offer them. Although there may be good reasons to believe the government has the best interests of everyone at heart, the task of delivering the goods and services that people need is a goal best shared with civil society. While in this section we have focused specifically on civil society organizations as they relate to democratic development, civil society also plays a key role in all aspects of community development and outreach. Health, education, welfare, sport, the arts, business - each can be seen as different aspects of non-governmental, civil, society. 

As L. Diamond remarks «democratic development requires that civil society not simply monitor, check and criticize the state but also give it loyalty and positive support when it is faithful to democratic principles.» In many countries around the world, individuals provide help pro bono - that is, people volunteer their assistance or services without pay. Even in countries where charity assistance tops 500 million dollars annually, millions of people volunteer their time to make the system work. US President John F. Kennedy's most memorable quotation - «Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country» - was addressed to civil society in America but is relevant in every country.

Recent highs and lows of civil society and democracy

In western and eastern Europe, for the last 30 years we have seen both the high point of civil society, and more recently, it's almost complete severance. The high point of connection between civil society and democracy included the emergence in the 1970s in western Europe of sustained social movements rooted in civil society, and in the 1980s in the east networks building up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. One of the reasons being that the conception of civil society was not simply seen as a 'sphere' but as a source of power for democratic change. There are signs that we are seeing a revival - in new, more international forms - of this awareness of civil society as a source of power, including the power to bring about political change. The victory in March 2004 of the Socialist Party in Spain, for example, against the pro-Iraq war People's Party of Aznar cannot be explained in terms primarily of party activity. However, civil society has also seen a drastic down point in several countries such as Poland or Zambia, where the governments' non-transparency and non-allowance of Civil Society Organisation (CSO) have impacted the democratic institutions. Finally, civil society is as said a way of balancing democracy and assuring that every vote matters.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

South Korea

Rooted in the country's long struggle for autonomy and democracy, South Korea's civil society has long been credited with allowing and encouraging ordinary citizens to involve themselves in social
movements. Though recent research suggests that social activism spurred by South Korea's many civic societies has little direct influence on policy-making, the mobilization of progressive organizations around a number of issues pertinent to the U.S.-ROK (United States- Republic of Korea) alliance opens a society-wide conversation on the development and future of South Korea's partnership with the United States.

Poland

Poland has experienced a retreat from tolerance, inclusion, transparency, and government accountability. The government’s policies have drawn criticism from the European Union as well as from international rights groups. “Alarm!” tweeted European Council President Donald Tusk, a former Polish prime minister, who said his countryfolk should not sleep peacefully under the leadership of the Law and Justice party. Indeed, the lack of civil society has shown to make the government more and more oppressive and prevent the democratic institution to advance.

South Africa

South Africa, moving into its third decade of democracy, has since Nelson Mandela possessed an exemplary civil society that has inspired many countries. Indeed, having had a hard past in relation to apartheid this country has, thanks to the continuous will of the civil society, advanced into democracy. Today, South Africa still has a strong civil society that combats the difficulties they might face such as racism, poverty and government transparency.

China

The concept of civil society has often been used as a device to differentiate China from other cultures. Though sometimes portrayed as a growing phenomenon, Chinese civil society is frequently said to be non-existent. Therefore, led to both a simplification and a narrow appreciation of societal developments in China. Indeed, lately thanks to the situation in Hong Kong, we can see the growing importance of civil society in China and how this country is slowly growing into a more righteous place.

Zambia
Zambia has an active civil society that possesses a lot of strengths such as: its ability to mobilize into social movements on contentious governance issues, as well as strong sectoral networks among like-minded CSOs. Zambian CSOs have a strong influence on tackling social issues on a national level. However, Zambia has issues with the legislation of CSOs and the poor regional distribution of civil society.

India

There is an occasional rise of conflict between the civil society and the state, as the state’s demands and expectations of the society are not fulfilled. Occasionally, the state also ignores the interests of the majority and intervenes in the sphere of civil society. As a welfare state, India is expected to ensure social justice along with economic growth. A number of schemes are adopted for the eradication of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, malnutrition, etc. With the expansion of state functions, bureaucratization becomes the order of the system with its corruption. Indian civil society raises its voice against such development.

Timeline of Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1754</td>
<td>Invention of the idea of Civil Society by Rousseau.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>French revolution thanks to the strong civil society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Creation of UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>South Africa became a democracy, thanks to civil society. This country is perceived as an example in the world and has inspired a lot of others.</td>
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Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Declaration on civil society and corporate globalization and the role of UNCTAD, 2004

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Civil society develops and advances democracy, but is also what has helped several countries obtain democracy. Indeed, approximately two hundred years ago civil society was much needed for the development of democracy, a rightful political regime. Many authors emphasized on how citizens should unite and hence was born the idea of Civil Society. After its declaration, there was a rise in the development of democracies all over Europe because of the values that this regime stands for. Civil society was then created through different forms of groups and movements: churches, civic associations, press and so forth. Civil Society was enforced through groups and workshops where people would talk and come to a general consensus. But also with the creation of several CSO’s (Civil Society Organizations) who aim to shape strategies with a view to improving local ownership of development processes. Furthermore, with the creation of UNCTAD, a UN organization dedicated to helping to strengthen the various civil societies all over the world. These attempts to obtain a well-functioning civil society, to help develop and advance democracy have not always been successful. Therefore it is necessary that we find solutions to the unstable issue of civil society.

Possible Solutions

Solutions to this global issue are not always easy to find, acknowledging that each civil society has its own ways because of their ethnicity, social background, and culture. Therefore the solutions needed to obtain stable participation of the civil society must be global and achievable for everyone. The possible solutions could be enforcing the CSOs even more with a global fund. Use the UNCTAD to promote the importance of civil society. A good way to educate the youngest citizens would be to
encourage them to learn about the duties of a citizen and that every vote and opinion matters. The strongest way to enforce civil society to advance democracy is through education. Making everyone aware of the possibilities if the citizens of the country in question are united would allow a more efficient and successful democracy.

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