

# THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE: THE CASE OF PAKISTAN

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## **Abstract**

*The role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in sustainable development and vibrant democratic culture has been recognized by intellectuals and international development agencies. In developing countries like Pakistan, CSOs have predominantly gained significant attention, as an instrument for public involvement and participation. However, the question emerges about the efficacy of CSOs, and as to whether or not, they have succeeded in realizing their objectives. This paper examines the role of CSOs for the consolidation of a democratic system of governance in Pakistan. The study is qualitative in nature, based on the investigation of available research literature and analysis of the main available public documents pertaining to the role of CSOs in Pakistan. Certain interviews and focus group discussions were conducted for primary evidence. The study finds that in Pakistan, the scope, role and operations of CSOs stand transmuted considerably over the past few years. The CSOs have faced hostile regimes, particularly, the third generation of CSOs. This has resulted in a powerless democratic culture. If Pakistan is to move forward, strong Civil Society Organizations are imperative. They will help in making a government accountable.*

**Key Words:** Democracy, Governance, Civil Society Organizations, Political Participation, Accountability

## **Introduction**

Since the 1990s, international development agencies have supported transition towards participatory and community-driven strategies rather than traditional top-down managed planning procedures.<sup>1</sup> Their support empowers and increases the collective efforts of local residents as well as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), in enhancing development outcomes like resource conservation, improved life quality and reduced inequality. Their support also activates the political process in the society. The CSOs frame, accumulate and prioritize preferences of citizens and help their representatives to take a collective action for overcoming their problems.<sup>2</sup> The CSOs also help in developing the realization among politicians, government and bureaucracy of

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responsiveness and accountability and also highlight the repercussion in case of poor performance.

In developing countries like Pakistan, CSOs have predominantly gained significant attention as an instrument for public involvement and participation. However, the question emerges about the efficacy of CSOs, and as to whether or not, they have succeeded in realizing their objectives. It can be opined that it is the core responsibility of the CSOs to take public's preferences and needs into account. These affect the decisions of the administration and determine the effectiveness of the government system. CSOs give voice to the demands of citizens<sup>3</sup>, support and promote equal and equitable opportunities for all as well as enhance service delivery.<sup>4</sup> They are also medium for conducting accountability and control procedures<sup>5</sup> and help in connecting the citizens to their chosen public representatives.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, sometimes specific agendas and self-interests are attached to CSOs. These are the agendas of self-interests that CSOs pursue, while overlooking their purpose of existence, which is the involvement of citizens in the process of decision-making. Despite these contradictory approaches of CSOs, it should be understood that civil society is a western concept, which cannot be imported to and applied in Asian and African countries.<sup>7</sup>

Precisely in the context of Pakistan, different researchers have pointed out challenges confronted by CSOs, which include: the government's continuous opposition to decentralized service delivery, overlying layers of accountability, interests conferred in major social sectors like health and sanitation, and lack, due to flawed legislation and security issues, of fostering and empowering an environment deemed necessary for social mobilizations.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Concept of Civil Society**

Civil society does not have any all-encompassing precise definition. Civil society is comprehended by researchers as '*an organizational layer of the polity that lies between the state and citizens.*' CSOs are composed of voluntary and non-profitable associations and organizations of citizens, formed by mutual resolve, with the aim of achieving some civil goals.<sup>9</sup> Although the state regulates the civil society, yet the civil society demands sufficient autonomy too. If sufficient autonomy is not provided, this can question the very existence of civil society. The civil society is established, when groups of people come together in

an organized manner to pursue goals of common interests.<sup>10</sup> Civil society organizations (CSOs) comprise interest groups, various labor unions, social movements for any cause, professional associations, welfare organizations etc. Civil societies are distinct from political societies (political societies compete with each other to gain state power) and organize private activity (e.g. spiritual or economic). There are two basic approaches (refer to neo-Weberian and the neo-Tocquevillian) to explain the linkages between civil society and democracy. Both of these approaches suggest that democracy is promoted through a developed civil society, but the apparent consensus also gives way to disagreement to some extent. They differ in their theoretical frame as the former is a structural/institutional theory and the latter a more cultural theory.

Putnam, in his most renowned work on regional governments, civic engagement and civil society, has argued that democratic institutions only perform, if they are entrenched in social and cultural contexts that support civic engagement. Putnam is of the view that powerful, effective and robust democratic governments need a strong civil society. He has further argued that the strength of civil society is directly proportional to economic vitality.<sup>11</sup>

A number of researchers have also pointed out the threat posed by weak civil society to the sustenance of democracy. However, the benefits of civil society for democracy are not agreed upon. Some authors have highlighted the role of highly mobilized civil societies in providing spaces for authoritarian regimes to weaken democracy as well as how the CSOs are used for taking over the state power in certain cases.

Theorists and academicians, however, argue the needs for a viable civil society for strengthening democracy and promoting good governance. In addition, CSOs nowadays present the interests of diverse groups, which have enlarged the scope for engagement of civil society in public institutions and their working. These points are also related to the prominent role of civil society in reducing the adversities and raising the living standards of human communities, which ultimately leads to good governance.<sup>12</sup>

There is a lack of strong and effective civil society in Pakistan even after seventy years of independence.<sup>13</sup> The civil society has faced tough times in its development and is still going through period of struggles and hardships. Therefore, it stays in a critical state, as the civic health of Pakistan is being very

fragile and vulnerable in nature. With the passage of time, civil society has changed in Pakistan and is likely to change further its role, scope and operations.

## **Democratic Governance**

The term governance has multiple dimensions and is used in plethora of contexts as associated with both private and government institutions. Governance relates to the manner of operating an organization<sup>14</sup> and its style of interaction with the dynamic world of markets, networks as well as hierarchies. This term is also used in the context of power sharing and its balancing in the politics, economies as well as societies.<sup>15</sup> The role of CSOs and the notion of good governance have changed the traditional forms of governments. Therefore, a new environment for governance has emerged through the involvement of CSOs in decision-making that has increased the inter dependency among the different stakeholders.<sup>16</sup>

The government institutions can adopt the strategy of providing resources to the stakeholders for overcoming their problems of collective action and ensuring the longevity of democracy. In developing countries, democratic set-ups are fragile and there are differences in policy preferences, leading to deviation from the path of democratic process. There is also scarcity of research literature on the role of democratic institutions in encouraging the participation of citizens and CSOs in decision-making and provision of services.<sup>17</sup> When the 'power distribution' is altered and enhanced among the stakeholders, it leads to better coordination among them, ultimately strengthening the democratic institutions. The anti-system activities are effectively checked by the institutionalized party system and the viable civil society.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the interconnection of elite-citizen relationship has an effect on the citizens and the elite's ability to credibly threaten prohibitions against potential democratic defectors.<sup>19</sup>

## **Role of CSOs in Development of Democratic System of Governance in Pakistan**

The potential of civil society has not been well recognized in Pakistan since its independence due to the weak societal forces.<sup>20</sup> The authoritarian regimes in Pakistan did not let the civil society create an impact on political action<sup>21</sup>. The democratic culture has been very unstable, owing to long periods of military

rule. However, civil society has progressed and struggled a lot since Pakistan's inception. With the passage of time, it has undergone changes in its role, scope and operations. It has effectively participated in the provision of service delivery and in aiding the poor by taking part in welfare activities. The civil society notion in Pakistan is defined in narratives formed around religious and ethnic forces, power elites, bureaucracy and military.<sup>22</sup> Thus, this oligarchic structure of asymmetrical powers has created hurdles for CSOs and their growth.<sup>23</sup>

Though the civil society organizations have played a substantial role in the provision of service delivery and welfare activities, they have faced hostile attitudes both from the military and civil regimes. By candidly exposing their weaknesses, the civil society organizations have defined their role of pressurizing the governments leading to a special psychological effect among the elites, who now fear the presence of a viable civil society with its various stakeholders and their advocacy agendas.<sup>24</sup>

Pakistani society has been offered a platform for participation in democratic process through the CSOs and movements of civil society. This will lead to provision of political space other than the one provided by political parties and governments. Civil society holds the capacity to offset the power of the state in pursuance of societal interests. For the last decade, civil society has effectively participated in all spheres of life, promoting democracy and protecting the interests of the society in general. At present, the civil society dominates political discussions and debates. The civil society has created an impact on the policies of the government through vigilant participation in the political process ever since 2007.<sup>25</sup> Apart from that, civil society has made a significant contribution in strengthening democracy by sensitizing matters regarding democracy. Though CSOs face many hindrances, they actively promote democracy in Pakistan and have assumed the role of Parliamentary oversight too. There are numerous CSOs such as Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), the Free and Fair Elections Network (FAFEN), the Center for Peace and Development Initiative (CPDI), the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), etc., that are engaged in overseeing the parliament and also give input and feedback to the policies, which will further strengthen transparency and accountability.

Civil society has also a role in promotion of good governance, despite facing the obstacles and ambivalent attitude of the government, both military as well

as civil. They both have shown hostility towards the CSOs engaged in advocacy and promotion of human rights and providing input to the public policy. However, policy change has been affected by the civil society to a large extent, as there have been direct and indirect impacts of civil society on the public policy,<sup>26</sup> for instance, the well known National Sanitation Policy adopted by the government was inspired by the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP).

## **Mobilizing Public Involvement by Civil Society**

Mobilizing citizens for participation in decision-making process is a vital element of democratic good governance. However, owing to insufficient information and knowledge of citizens and stakeholders, the CSOs have failed to involve them in the democratic system of governance. Besides, educating citizens is not the priority of CSOs in Pakistan, the reason being the hindrances posed by elite and politically influential groups. This point of view is strongly contested by the CSOs. They allege that they have always conveyed the necessary information and knowledge to citizens and their public representatives. They claim that most of CSOs are directly involved with citizens in educating them, while others engage politicians, bureaucrats and team members to impart knowledge. The detractors of CSOs also claim that the civil organizations are either the tools of the elite or the elite use them as tools.

In short, there are mixed opinions about the perceived role of CSOs. On one hand citizens express distrust towards Pakistani government and show very little or no interest in the good governance and democratization process. Likewise, the majority of stakeholders argue that CSOs have failed to put across their opinions about governance due to their vested interests. Quite the reverse is expressed by CSOs members, who argue that they either have no such liberty or it is very limited, when it comes to formulating political agendas, outlining critical issues and enquiring local government representatives. In contrast, local government officials account that CSOs have definite political agendas, hence, they are 'Elite Trap'.

## **Influencing Decision-Making for a Democratic System of Governance**

The influence of CSOs in development of a democratic system of governance and the impact of CSOs upon the decision-making process of local governments cannot be denied. In general, it is expected that the CSOs work on

the principle of integrating public values into decision-making and promoting good governance. Some academics<sup>27</sup> have debated that service delivery can be improved by increasing citizen involvement in decision-making process, but still the major determining factors of the efficacy of citizen involvement are the influence of CSOs and the degree to which they are socially connected. Some stakeholders have vocally contested the role of CSOs on the ground that they have proven to be futile, as they have failed to impact the decision-making process. The key challenges to CSOs and social accountability in Pakistan are posed by existing bureaucratic system, disregard of accountability system, vested interest, a flawed legislative system, security and safety problems, and non-recognition of social mobilizers.<sup>28</sup>

However, numerous CSOs contend that instead of using information for influencing decision-making process, bureaucrats utilize the information for manipulations. Hence, it can be said that CSOs involvement is implicitly minimal in democratization process of governance, as CSOs have least ability to influence government decisions. In contrast, officials raise the questions about the honesty of CSOs. Many government officials view that CSOs do not perform their due obligations; instead their focus is on procedural routine works, whereby, ignoring the concerns of grassroot organizations. Further, CSOs are not playing their part in promoting relationship between citizens and government.

## Key Findings

- Increase in numbers of CSOs and their influence on the advancement of democratic systems of governance is unquestionable. Yet, precisely in the context of Pakistan, CSOs have failed to influence the decision-making process and democratic governance system. The research findings advocate that the struggles and day-to-day citizens' realities are not reflected in the work of CSOs. The researchers have evaluated that there is lack of clear vision, and no proper framework is adopted by CSOs to perform their functions.
- It has also been noted that perceptions about Pakistani citizens being 'ignorant' is not accurate. As suggested by scholars,<sup>29</sup> citizens are clearly cognizant of their surroundings and are well aware of socio-political realities.

- It was found from this study that CSOs have manipulated the citizens' sentiments and created false impressions about making governments accountable for their activities, whereas, in reality, they are not being allowed to work freely by the bureaucratic system. The researchers came to the assumption that it was impossible for CSOs to educate the public or influence decision-making processes in the absence of political will and the consent of bureaucracy.
- Trust deficits prevail among all the stakeholders. Government officials and CSOs play a blame game, while ignoring the public preferences. Not only that, but it has also been found from results that interference from elite groups and political parties have frequently paralyzed the elected government officials and the CSOs.
- These research results are consistent with the theoretical evaluations of many scholars,<sup>30</sup> who tested and showed that although governance structure is equipped with better information, due to very little and flawed accountability, they are more vulnerable to the elite groups.
- Findings of the World Bank also indicate that decentralization can favor elite ruling groups, by increasing their power rather than fostering devolution and equity in representation, involvement, sharing of benefits and influence.
- Apart from these issues, the researchers established that failures of CSOs in education of the citizens and involving citizens in the decision-making could be the leading cause of their failure of policies in Pakistan. The researchers pointed out that CSOs are one of the buzzwords in development discourse that can be immersed easily for promoting particular interests.<sup>31</sup>
- We can argue that within the current governmental and societal settings in Pakistan, the concept of civil society and CSOs is rather inadequate. Furthermore, CSOs' failure in Pakistan has shown that the level of Pakistan's political maturity is at a nascent stage, which in turn, makes it very difficult for CSOs to appropriately grow and establish their authority.
- Also, it could be argued that CSOs work closely with citizens, as most of them are from community themselves. As Europe and Asia are heterogeneous and diverse entities, several debates have been instigated over the applicability of civil society concepts outside



Europe.<sup>32</sup> CSOs are believed to promote the involvement of all stakeholders in the decision-making of government, hence, they are considered to be a prerequisite for the development of institutions, but in Pakistan's case, the situation is opposite.

- The research findings tend to show that for the development of a democratic system of governance in Pakistan, CSOs have not played their role in enhancing constructive relations among stakeholders. Thus, such a finding adds up to the debate of whether the western civil society model is applicable universally.
- As the role of CSOs has been negligible in the case of citizen empowerment and citizen participation, therefore, it can be concluded that CSOs in Pakistan are not able to work properly.
- Although CSOs do not have the power to change the world, yet their influence cannot be ignored. In the course of history, there are many success stories of CSOs. The most valued work of Putnam debated that CSOs contribute towards better connectivity and amplify trust in many societies, thus, impacting social capital in a positive manner. Moreover, it also supports network development and encourages associated general norms. However, the findings of this paper are otherwise.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it can be definitely argued that the establishment of vibrant and robust CSOs in Pakistan is and would be full of challenges. As a by-product of the prevailing society, the same disagreements and tensions predominating local social settings also afflict CSOs. Thus, we conclude that a vibrant and sturdy role of CSOs is also not the remedy of Pakistan's current governance and development challenges. A strenuous and tireless people-centered effort, rational donors, governmental willingness and pragmatic and selfless CSOs constitute, what can bring sustainable and meaningful change in Pakistan's obdurate governance settings.

In Pakistan, where citizens are not aware of their rights and role in governance, CSOs have a huge potential for bringing a change. This paper recommends that CSOs can play a very effective role in the establishment of a participation-friendly, transparent and accountable governing system. More precisely, the researchers are of the view that visible structures of the

governments in Pakistan, may it be any tier, are not able to perform and the fruits of governance do not reach at a grassroots level. This clearly means that CSOs participation is being undermined in Pakistan. An appropriate and vigorous legal framework, having consent of all the stakeholders (citizens, CSOs, bureaucracy, political leadership), is required. But, without a very strong political and bureaucratic will, a CSOs' effective role in democratic governance would still remain a distant reality.

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