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Democracy Through an Undemocratic Institution?

The Church as Part of Civil Society

Anne Gathuo

With the resurgence of civil society in the last two decades, the church has risen in importance as an agency for democracy, campaigning for government reform and conducting civic education among citizens. Yet the church remains internally undemocratic and rigidly traditional. Can an institution that refuses to embrace democratic practices help enhance democracy in the wider society in which it operates? The author discusses the advantages and disadvantages that the church has in democratization, relative to other groups in civil society.

Introduction: Democratization

The "wave of democracy" that swept the world in the late 1980s and early 1990s saw many countries transition from single-party authoritarian regimes to multi-party systems. Two decades or so after these states adopted multi-party systems, many of them are still struggling to achieve real democracy. Clearly, democracy entails more than multi-party elections.

How do countries transition from autocratic regimes to

democratic states? Different theories of democratization that have emerged revolve around the following themes: 1) economic development – perhaps the most touted of all theories of democratization, economic development is thought to be a major catalyst of democratization. David Lerner (1968) and S. M. Lipset (1959) connected democratization to economic growth and “modernization.” Indeed, newly independent countries in the 1950s and the 1960s aggressively pursued economic development with the expectation that democracy would be the natural result. Diamond (1997) and Pinkney (1993) maintained the importance of a fairly high level of economic development as a precondition of democracy; 2) technology, globalization and international involvement – the economic, political, ideological, and other elements that constitute the international environment all affect the processes that take place in individual countries including the democratization process. This happens directly through political, legal and economic pressure exerted on countries deemed to be undemocratic; as well as indirectly through diffusion of ideas from one part of the world to another. States may be encouraged to become democratic by example of other democracies around the world; or they may find it in their interest to democratize given the nature of their alliances and the external threats they face; 3) civil society – political culture, traditions and institutions, that promote ideas under what is collectively referred to as civil society are now recognized as inextricably linked to democracy. These three factors, coupled with enabling state institutions interact to enhance democratic practices.

The focus of this essay is civil society as an agent of democratization. I discuss religious institutions, in particular the Christian church, as civil society groups and their role in strengthening democracy. Although largely inherently undemocratic, religious institutions have distinct advantages over other civil society groups, which make them uniquely placed to enhance democracy.

Civil Society

As early as the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville recognized the importance of civil associations in promoting and maintaining democracy. He believed that civil associations served to overcome the relative weakness of individual citizens who could neither fend for themselves nor force others to act; as well as provided arenas for shaping public opinion and spurring public policy (Galston, 2000). Despite Tocqueville's assertion on the importance of civil associations however, according to John Keane, for nearly a century and a half, the language of civil society was absent from intellectual discourse (Keane, 1998).

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In the 1980s, the idea of civil society reemerged, and its resurgence is now evident all over the world (Hall, 1995; Keane, 1998; Haberson, 1994; Gellner, 1994). According to Galston (2000), there are several reasons for this

renewal of civil society: 1) the events of the former Soviet-bloc nations dramatized ways in which civil associations could serve as effective sources of resistance to oppressive governments; 2) nongovernmental organizations have emerged throughout the world as a voice for previously unheard groups; 3) the idea of civil society appealed to liberals who were unhappy about the limitations of government action and to conservatives who, troubled by the amorality of the market and its effects on social institutions, "turned to voluntary associations as sources of stability and virtue" (p. 64). The current drive for the government/faith-based organizations partnership in the United States can be seen in this light; 4) as explained by Robert Putnam (1995) the traditional sources of socialization, solidarity and active citizenship have become weak, prompting the emphasis on civil society (Galston, 2000, pp. 64-65).

What is "civil society?" According to Hazel Henderson,

“citizens’ movements and peoples’ associations of all kinds cover the whole range of human concerns – from service clubs, churches, self-help and spiritual groups to chambers of commerce and professional associations of teachers, doctors, farmers, scientists, musicians and artists” (Henderson, 1996). Such groups are concerned about how to make government accountable to citizens, investors, consumers, workers and other actors in the society. Secondary associations are political in nature and are therefore free lessons for democracy; they provide lessons in the art of association by teaching citizens how to exchange views, to organize, to guard their autonomy, and to keep an independent eye on the government (Bryant, 1995; Haberson, 1994). These groups are widely recognized as precursors of social change (Diamond, 1997; Prah, 1996; Haberson, 1994; Hall, 1995; Bryant, 1995). Schmitter

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defines civil society as a set or system of self-organized groups that: 1) are relatively independent of both public authorities and private units of production and reproduction; 2) are capable of deliberating about and taking collective actions in defense or promotion of their interests or passions; 3) do not seek to replace either state agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole; and 4) agree to act within pre-established rules of a “civil” nature, that is, conveying mutual respect (Schmitter, 1997, p. 240). According to Pierre P. Lizee (2000), civil society has traditionally been conceived by its proponents as a site of resistance against two forces: that of the state and that of the market. Larry Diamond (1997) spells out the functions of civil society in the following terms:

limiting the power of the state more generally and challenging its 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 and building a culture of tolerance and civic engagement; incorporating marginal groups into the political process and enhancing their responsiveness to societal interests and needs; 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. (p. 18).

Further, Diamond asserts that the strength and vigor of civil society is one variable that can be manipulated and pushed in a democratic direction and accelerated even when economic development is lacking (Diamond, 1997, p. 7-35). This is especially important in many countries of the Third World where economic development has stagnated, thus providing little hope that economic development will steer the countries to democracy. Diamond asserts, for example, that one element of hope in Africa's "second liberation" is the degree to which women's groups in civil society are mobilizing and educating women to become actively involved in the political process, which is bound to yield policy outputs conducive to lower fertility (Diamond, 1997, p.11). Civil associations pave way for political associations: the more individuals get used to the idea of coming together for economic, social, or moral purposes, the more they enhance their capacity to pursue political ends (Galston, 2000 pp. 68-69).

Societal accountability requires an organized civil society able to influence the political system and public bureaucracies on a continuous basis. An advantage of civil society is that unlike electoral mechanism, civil society can organize between elections "on demand" on critical issues, policies and functionaries (Smulovitz and Peruzotti, 2000, p.150).

Limitations of Civil Society

Civil society is not without its limitations. Hadenius and Uggle (1996) argue that associations must be internally democratic, have diverse membership, and operate on some principle of relative equality among members if they are to fulfill the pluralist and educational functions essential for civil society. Fatton gives an example of the deep ethnic cleavages in African society which give rise to a civil society that is a "disorganized plurality of mutually exclusive projects that are not necessarily democratic" (Fatton, 1995, p. 75). It has also been argued that groups like those that constitute civil society will create chaos because "group thinking generates and fosters barbarity, bigotry, vengeance and jingoism" (Ricci, 1971 p. 6). Ricci, however, argues that multiple group membership by the same individuals can help overcome this problem as individual group interests are offset by the interests of other groups. Wesolowski (1995) agrees and states that groups are freely joined and freely left and that, while they show a propensity of internal loyalty, they are still able to negotiate conflicting interests with other groups.

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In countries struggling with democratic transition, most civil associations are relatively new, disorganized and poor.

Associations such as trade unions, professional bodies and independent media have few if any roots in rural society where the bulk of the population lives, hence their limited usefulness. The relative weakness of these organizations makes it easy for them to succumb to government repression either by being outlawed or co-opted into the ruling party. The fact that civil organizations have to operate within the laws set by the government they are trying to check is a severe limitation. Wilmot and Caliguire (1996) found that non-governmental organizations in South Africa were severely hindered in their operations by a myriad of repressive policies, laws, and structures inherited from the apartheid regime (p. 64).

Smolar (1996) argues that a united apolitical “moral” civil society is a myth. Citing civil society in the post communist era, Smolar points out that civil society turned out to be a “historical costume” (p. 29) that was discarded as soon as its goal was achieved. The activists in civil society groups moved into government and business “leaving a plethora of associations, human rights groups, independent publishing concerns and informal educational institutions without enough people to keep them going” (pp. 29-30). James and Caliguire (1996) found the same situation in post apartheid South Africa, and King and LoGerfo (1996) reported the same for Thailand. At the same time, with the emergence of a legitimate South African government, James and Caliguire (1996) found that the donor community opted to channel funds to the government rather than directly to NGOs, thus further limiting their capacity to operate. Further, Smolar (1996) points out that at times of severe economic recession, people suffering from joblessness and falling incomes are preoccupied with survival and are unlikely to plunge into social, cultural, scientific, political and philanthropic activities (p. 33).

Carothers (1999) points out that the idea that civil society inherently represents the public good is also wrong. He argues that public interest is a highly contested domain, with different groups claiming diametrically different interests on the same issue, all in the name of public good. He contends that some society groups are myopically focused on their narrow agendas and not interested in balancing different visions of the public good.

Religion and Democracy

G.W.F. Hegel, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche all linked democracy to Christianity. Tocqueville claimed that what drove mankind and society towards democracy and equality was “the hand of God” (Tocqueville in Fukuyama, 2000, p. 6). He equated democracy to equality and therefore saw Christianity as the foundation of democracy (Fukuyama, 2000). He described religion as America’s first

political institution because of its indirect effects on political life; and saw success in American democracy as resulting from the unity between “the spirit of freedom” and the “spirit of religion” which, unlike in Europe, were moving in the same direction (Hillel, 2000, p. 87). Hillel sees Protestantism as having encouraged a kind of individualism and freedom with respect to authority that supported political democracy, and gives the example of the founders of United State’s New England (p. 89). For Nietzsche too, modern democracy rests largely on a

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secular inheritance of Christian values; and he interprets the Christian doctrine of equality in terms of secularization of the Christian belief in the equality of all souls (Ansell-Pearson, 1994, p. xi).

This intimate connection between the Christian doctrine and modern democracy has been used to explain the greater incidence of democracy in countries where Christianity is prevalent, as in Latin America, than in countries where it is not, as in Asia (Fukuyama and Marwah, 2000, p. 91). It is however important to point out that values drawn from other religions can also foster democracy. India’s democracy has been credited to, among other things, the fact that Gandhi drew from Hindu religious values and styles of action in his peaceful struggles for independence, democracy, end of “untouchability” and respect for Muslims (Stepan, 2000, p.42).

But Church and State have not always coexisted peacefully, and history shows that Western Christianity has been “multivocal” (Stepan, 2000, p. 42) on democracy. The Catholic doctrine has been opposed to liberalism, nation-state, tolerance and democracy. French Catholics saw democracy as an enemy of religion (Hillel, 2000, p. 88). Both Lutheranism and Calvinism also placed obstacles to democracy (Stepan, 2000, p. 44). According to Huntington (1991), the Catholic Church did not make its political peace with democracy until after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. This explains the delay in democracy in

many Catholic nations and the fact that the “third wave” was mainly a Catholic affair – Latin America, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Hungary (Fukuyama and Marwah, 2000, p. 92).

While Christianity has been recognized as an important factor in democracy, it has been pointed out that the doctrine of separation of church and state is crucial. Tocqueville argued that democracy would not fare well in Muslim countries because of non-separation of religion and state (Hillel, 2000, p. 94). The separation helps prevent the development of vested religious interests in the fortunes of particular political forces and parties as occurred in Europe. Not engaging in politics helped American religious leaders to concentrate on cultivating opinions and moral habit among citizens – thus the state enjoyed the moral benefits of religious faith while avoiding religion’s potential hostility to liberty (Hillel, p. 91).

In the last few decades religion has reemerged in importance all around the world (Demerath, 1997; Wilson, 1997). In addition to playing its traditional role, religious institutions have become social critics – a role that challenges, not individual moral behavior, but morality of public policy and practice. New partnerships between the church and the state are being formed. In the U.S. for example, with the passage of welfare reform in 1996 came “Charitable Choice,” a provision that allows faith-based organizations to receive funding from the state to provide services to welfare recipients under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The Bush administration has renewed the push for faith-based organizations/state collaboration. The growing importance of religion is evident all around the world with the emergence of such phrases as “liberation theology” [Latin America], “solidarity” [Poland], “fundamentalism” [Iran], “moral majority” [U.S.], (Demerath, 1997); and “political sermon” [Africa] (Wiseman, 1995; Mugambi, 1997; Assefa, 1996).

Church as a Civil Society Organization

As one of the organizations constituting civil society, the Christian church has, in the last two decades, risen in importance as a promoter of democracy, particularly in Latin America and Africa. Despite its dominant role, and its documented successes, the inherent undemocratic nature of the church

has led critics to question its appropriateness as a propagator of democracy. Can an internally undemocratic institution help foster

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democracy in the wider society? Even within the church, there are disagreements as to whether the church is or should strive to become a democracy. The argument that the church should be a democracy stems from the contention that Western democratic theory is deeply embedded in Christianity, and that democracy is scriptural. According to Daniel C. Maguire (2003), the scriptural statement that whoever would be great must be a servant is a clear indication that the church should be a democracy and that it is the leaders that have subverted this by creating hierarchy that is meant to cover the leaders on the lower echelons (congregational pastors and priests) as well as the church followers. Equality among members, which is clearly lacking in the church and other religious institutions, is a key ingredient contributing to the successful functioning of a civil society group.

Conversely, others contend that the church is neither a democracy, nor should it try to mimic one. The argument goes along the line that God never intended democracy as the form of government for the church – that the church is a Kingdom and Christ is the King with Christians being the subjects. Church leaders are ‘elders’ charged with oversight and responsibility over the church and accountable only to God (Beard, 2003).

Whichever of these two arguments is stronger, is largely irrelevant. The church has seized the opportunity to push for democracy

in many countries, in some cases with monumental success. A case in point is Kenya where a coalition of Christian churches campaigned successfully for a multi-party system in the 1980s, fought for constitution review and sponsored civic education in the 1990s, and facilitated unity among opposition parties in 2002 to bring down an autocratic ruling party that had been in power for forty years since the country's independence from Britain in 1963.

What accounts for the church's success? Many of the limitations that plague other civil society groups do not affect the church. As an institution, the church has distinct advantages that make it uniquely positioned for the role. The autonomy, popularity and organizational capacity of the church, history has proved, puts it in a unique position to support social action (Lincoln, 1990; Mukenge, 1983; Childs, 1980; Hamilton, 1975; Nelsen, 1971). As a key institution supporting democratization efforts, the church is directly involved in 1) checking state authority and 2) providing the structure for the development of leadership skills and the learning and practice of democracy through the many church-affiliated groups.

The church draws its strength from a large loyal membership. The enduring nature of the church and its separation from the state gives it an advantage over other civil organizations. As Smolar (1996); James and Caliguire (1996); and King and LoGerfo (1996) point out, other civil society groups tend to be short-lived because activists join the government once their initial goal is achieved. Further, the church falls under the "advantaged" category in Schneider and Ingram's (1997) model of social construction of target population. Advantaged groups possess considerable resources (size, voting strength, wealth, propensity to mobilize) to influence policy and at the same time carry positive social constructions (p. 108). As a result, it has immense capacity to organize. Many causes in history all over the world have been achieved through the strategic use of church networks. In both Latin America and Africa, the church was a major support institution in conducting 'education for democracy' programs in the 1980s and 1990s and spearheading the

campaign for democracy. This organization capacity is not limited to churches, but it pervades all religious groups depending on their dominance in a particular locale. In post-Saddam Hussein's Iraq for example, the organizational capacity of the Shi'ite clerics enabled them to "blanket Iraq's Shi'ite mosques with political-action kits, complete with English-language slogans and talking points" within one day (Cambanis, 2003). While other leaders tried to organize political parties for a new Iraq, the Shi'ite clerics, by their sheer numbers and the respect they command quickly stepped in to fill the power vacuum left by the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.

According to Lagos (2000), low and declining levels of interpersonal trust constitute an important barrier to accumulation of social capital and the development of a civil society. People who do not trust their peers have difficulty trusting the leaders and institutions that represent them. Association with people sharing the same beliefs and values helps to enhance trust and in this respect, the church has advantage over other institutions. Because for many people particularly the poor, the church is the center of all social activity, interpersonal trust tends to be higher than in other groups.

Another advantage of the church over other civil organizations is its autonomy. Repressive governments normally suppress or fragment civil society and hence political association. This is done by outlawing the organizations or bringing their activities under state control. The resulting mistrust of these organizations by the citizens greatly weakens civil society. But Galston (2000) contends that if quasi-independent civil associations [such as churches and mosques] are tolerated, political association will be maintained and invigorated in such institutions. Wiseman (1994) points out that in the 1980s and 1990s in many African countries, the "political sermon" became popular as the church, being the only civil institution that maintained a degree of autonomy in the autocratic regimes, became the center of political activity. Indeed, history abounds with examples of the church taking advantage of its autonomy to fight oppression. The Black church in the

United States is credited with fighting slavery and playing a major role in the civil rights movement (Taylor, 1994; Montgomery, 1993; Hamilton, 1972; Marx, 1971). More recently, in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Shi'ite clerics were among the few dissenting voices.

Another unique aspect of the church as a civil society organization is that it is relatively unencumbered by a constitution that limits its role. The church and church leaders define their roles along a spiritual/social works continuum. The social works range widely, which gives the church greater potential for involvement in social matters than other task-specific civil organizations such as trade unions or professional organizations. Where other civil organizations have been absent or weak, the church has performed various roles including: protest politics, electoral politics, theological development, consciousness-raising, economic development, and social development. This is evident in most developing countries where churches and other religious organizations fill the gaps left by government in the provision of social services by running schools, hospitals and other services. The extensive social role played by religious groups gives them legitimacy among followers who look up to them for political cues.

Most civil society organizations have an urban bias and tend to draw from groups that have high levels of education. The church, however, is a fairly open institution that attracts diverse types and classes of people. The ability of an institution to link people at different levels who have a rich spectrum of interests makes for a healthy political climate (Havel and Klaus, 1996). In developing countries, where the population is predominantly rural and uneducated, religious institutions in some cases provide the only formal institutions with which the population is affiliated. This has also been found to be true in the U.S. in both poor rural and urban communities (Gittell, 1999).

Conclusion

The immense power held by religious institutions can be used to retard democracy just as much as it can be used to enhance it. Almost all religious groups, for example, reinforce the subjugation of women. The Catholic Church preaches against birth control and divorce. The evangelical churches have continued to maintain an “otherworldly” stand, thus encouraging political passiveness among followers. The near absolute control that these institutions have over every aspect of their followers’ lives makes them a formidable force both in political socialization and self-determination. The fact that religious institutions in many poor communities are sometimes the exclusive providers of social services such as education and health, give them not only legitimacy and great authority in the eyes of their beneficiaries, it also puts them in a position to determine or undermine public policy. The Catholic Church, for example, runs schools where it has great control over the curriculum, leading to the indoctrination of children into the Catholic discipline, which may not always be in line with government policy. The case of the use of artificial family planning methods, and the use of condoms to prevent the spread of AIDs are two examples of how the church can undermine government policy. In many developing countries where the governments are anxious to implement population control measures, the church teaches against family planning in schools and churches, and refuses to offer family planning services in its hospitals. The church also actively preaches against the use of condoms thus frustrating the efforts of the government and nongovernmental organizations in their fight against the AIDs epidemic. Governments must not, therefore, abdicate their role in the provision of social services for the poor because of the potential for the religious institutions to hold both the people and the government hostage. As far as political education is concerned, religious institutions could use their organizing potential to facilitate this, with other civil society groups specializing in political education taking the lead role in conducting the actual classes.

This will help avoid religious indoctrination in the name of political education.

While religious groups play an important role in limiting the power of the state, sometimes they usurp this power upon themselves. This is very often the case when there is no clear separation of religion and state. A case in point is the current situation in Iraq, where Shi'ite clerics moved into government offices and declared themselves administrators. For religious institutions to act as successful civil society groups the religion-state relationship must be Secular but Friendly to Religion as described by Stepan (2000). According to Stepan's model, countries that fall under the Secular but Friendly to Religion category have no official religion, and there is a clear separation of religion and state. Although private religious schools are allowed, they must conform to state established academic standards and curriculum. Also, full private and public freedom for all religions are guaranteed under the constitution as long as they do not violate individual liberties.

Thus, religious institutions have the potential to enhance democracy and even bring down autocratic governments but checks must be put in place to ensure that the institutions do not mimic the tyranny they purport to fight.

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