Summary of Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific Region

How Does Civil Society Supports Democracy?

Civil society has been used as a lens to understand politics and deployed as a key variable to explain democratic political change. Civil society organizations can enhance democratization processes by increasing citizen representation, demanding the transparency of government transactions, and fostering the accountability of public officials. A strong civil society can play a disciplinary role in relation to the state by enforcing standards of public morality and responsibility. However, not every autonomous group can be considered as having a democratic disposition. Problems may also arise when civil society is perceived as a replacement of government in the performance of public duties.

Although social networks exist in every society, they are widely believed to play a different and more prominent role in Asian societies, especially those with a Confucian heritage, than in Western states, particularly Western states with mature capitalist economies, liberal democratic political systems with robust civil societies, and well developed legal systems characterized by rule of law and a modern bureaucratic administrative system. Civil societies in Asian countries are highly diverse in composition, resource endowment, and goals; they are arenas of power, struggle, and cooperation

It is hard to generalize about the trajectory of civil society organizations in the region as a whole as patterns of development and typology are highly context sensitive. Domestic patterns of political organization, historical and contemporary access to political institutions, and the relationship between the State and civil society are just some of the myriad factors that influence the breadth and activity of civil society. For example, Thai CSOs are considered both highly reactive to the political/social climate and ephemeral such that any figures for the "size" of Thai civil society need to be highly qualified. Also due to factors such as tax law, the regulatory environment, and streams of external/internal funding, there can be huge disparities in the counts of registered/unregistered or official/unofficial civil society organizations. Such a disparity is typified by South Korea with 11,050 registered organizations accounting for about 18 percent of the 60,000 projected NGOs in South Korea.

Nevertheless, surveying the historical (briefly) and contemporary pattern of organization of civil society is a necessary step in any attempt at deeper understanding of the sector. What can be said to have emerged from the study is a general sense that civil society is acknowledged as a legitimate non-state public realm, and that civil society organizations are generally increasing in number and capacity with respect to focusing on and fostering a democratic agenda.

Along with being illuminating to the pattern of growth, the legal and regulatory framework for CSO formation and operation is treated as a distinct area of research. This is a key avenue or research as the old hierarchical paradigm of the state shaping civil society is very much in place with respect to domestic civil society organizations in

countries such as Japan. Japan ranks highly on the two most reliable predictors of the level of development of a nation's civil society; income and education. However, Japan has perhaps the most severe regulatory environment in the developed world with a government able to directly impact an organization's viability include regulation of a group's legal status or activities, direct financial flows, and tax benefits. Consequently, the dearth of large professional groups speaks to the import of this topic as a factor in this study.

The capacity of civil society organizations are indicative, generally, of the ability of sections of civil society to enact/spur the types of changes the literature ascribes to them. It is also revealing, in that domestic civil society organizational capacity is inexorably linked with issues of the means of financial support, and/or the ability to sustain the work that they do. In contexts such as Thailand where CSOs appear largely dependent on international funding for sustained action, sustainability is too dependent on international funding priorities remaining constant. Such instances are particularly important from a research perspective as they allow us to highlight systemic weaknesses, but also identify specific points where funding can be channeled as leverage points for future action.

Likewise, the accountability of civil society organizations is an area of research which can be instrumental to both academic and functional exercises. The study of upward accountability between CSOs and government, to some extent, is embedded in the discussion of the regulatory environment. Perhaps the more interesting aspect is the downward accountability of CSOs to the communities they serve and the community writ large. Treatments of corruption in the Asia/Pacific are widespread in the literature and have touched on how CSOs can be just as corrupt as other segments of society/government. However, an aspect of accountability that has yet to be explored in the same depth is the orientation of many CSOs on process rather than inputs and outcomes, creating a divide between fund-providers and fund recipients. This performance accountability issue has played out visibly in countries such as the Philippines, although it should be noted that Filipino CSOs are on the cutting-edge of NGO self-regulation.

All of the previous factors can be seen as essential to the problematic of CSOs role in democratic change. The stage of political development as it impacts the role of CSOs, becomes a distinct sub-thrust of this focus. They are intertwined, as is the case in India where the unresponsiveness of India's political parties and government has encouraged the Indian public to mobilize through nongovernmental organizations and social movements, and consequently made Indians less confident of the transformative power of the state and more confident of the power of the individual and local community.

The power of civil society organizations in democratic change has been actualized throughout the region. From the "People Power" demonstrations in the Philippines and the direct and indirect role of citizen groups in the shaping of cotemporary Indonesian democracy, to the South Korean CSOs who announced a list of candidates that were viable and non-viable as parliamentarians, CSOs are often the democratic vanguard.