
UNIT 7 CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL REGIMES

Structure

- 7.1 Introduction
 - Aims and Objectives
- 7.2 Debate over Civil Society
- 7.3 Civil Society and State
- 7.4 Political Regimes
 - 7.4.1 Democracy
 - 7.4.2 Aristocracy
 - 7.4.3 Monarchy
 - 7.4.4 Dictatorship
 - 7.4.5 Republic
- 7.5 Civil Society's Relevance in Asia
- 7.6 The Asian Crisis and Regime Convergence
- 7.7 War on Terrorism and Political Regimes
- 7.8 Trends in Regime Types, 1990-2005
- 7.9 The Decline in Closed Authoritarian Regimes and the Rise of Hegemonic Authoritarian Regimes
- 7.10 Summary
- 7.11 Terminal Questions
 - Suggested Readings

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Civil society is a popular, normatively charged concept that does not have a single meaning. The concept of civil society and its perception as a problem or solution to the ills of society and state have varied with intellectual tradition and the prevailing socio-political and economic conditions. Concepts of civil society in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe emerged in the context of the development of the commercial sphere and the modern state. Conceived essentially, but not exclusively, as a sphere of market relations, civil society was viewed by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers and Hegel as a positive development, which nevertheless posed a problem for social order that had to be overcome by appealing to the moral sentiments of society or state guidance and arbitration. Later, Marx viewed civil society as an arena of alienation and exploitation that had to be overcome through revolution. Tocqueville, in contrast, viewed civil society as a positive force in sustaining democracy in a condition of social equality and a weak central government.

The ideal of civil society has travelled far from its origins in Western philosophy to the United States, Latin America, Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. Until the 1980s, debates on civil society were largely confined to the history of ideas in Western political philosophy. With the third wave of democratisation, however, especially the dissolution of the USSR and the emergence of the public sphere as legitimate in the post-Soviet Central and Eastern European states, discussion of the proper relationship between the individual, society, state and market came to the fore, sparking widespread debate over the meaning of civil society and its place in politics.

Early European articulations contrasted civil society with society in a state of nature or with despotic government. There was no attempt to distinguish civil society from the community and political society at large. With the development of the commercial state in eighteenth-century Europe, civil society, conceived essentially as a market-organised sphere of production and competition, came to be viewed as a distinct, legally protected public realm, separate from family and state. Modern accounts of civil society usually trace the term to Adam Ferguson, a leading thinker of the Scottish Enlightenment who viewed commerce and trade and more generally the development of the “commercial state” as ending the corrupt feudal system and reinforcing liberty and personal security.

Aims and Objectives

This Unit would enable you to understand

- The relationship between state and civil society
- Various political regimes
- The relevance of civil society in Asia

7.2 DEBATE OVER CIVIL SOCIETY

Despite his articulation of the idea of civil society, Ferguson did not distinguish between civil society and the polity. He believed that “society can not be detached from its form of government, nor can economic man be torn, in practice or abstraction, from the political man.” The German conception of civil society, which drew its inspiration from Ferguson and Adam Smith, did however, make a firm distinction between civil society, the family, and the state. Asserting that civil society is a product of modern state and that its development presupposes a state, Hegel conceptualised civil society as a sphere of market relations, regulated by civil law, intervening between the family and the state. Hegel viewed civil society as prone to periodic instability and conflict, despite its tendency towards a natural equilibrium. To ensure, “civility” and stability, he concluded that state had to order civil society. Hence state intervention to guide and govern civil society was legitimate.

Two contemporary formulations of civil society – that of the New Left and that of the Neo-Tocquevillean, or liberal-democracy, model, although differ in purpose and strategy – both share a positive take on civil society. The New Left conception is rooted in the Gramscian formulation of civil society, which departs from Marx. Orthodox Marxists view civil society, constituted by production class and their attendant social and political relations, as a structural problem to overcome through revolution. Marx, in contrast to Hegel, viewed the state as a superficial structure in the service of the dominant capitalist class and depicted civil society as co-terminus with the socio-economic base of the state. For Marx, therefore, civil society was a problem that had to be overcome, not by the state,

which was its captive, but through a revolution that would put the proletariat in the driver's seat. With the workers party in power, civil society would dissolve into the state, which would represent the true public good. Marx's depiction of civil society as an arena of alienation and exploitation that had to be abolished deprived it of analytic value in orthodox Marxism.

Differentiating state and civil society, Gramsci stressed the crucial role of the cultural and ideological support provided by civil society for the survival of European capitalism. Gramsci's conception of civil society includes all social institutions that are non-production-related, non-governmental and non-familial, ranging from recreational groups to trade unions, churches, and political parties.

The voluntarism and political agency accorded to civil society in Gramsci's account inform much contemporary thinking of the New Left on civil society. Robert Cox, for example, posits civil society as a surrogate for revolution. Others, like Jurgen Habermas, with due recognition of the pluralism that pervades modern society, view civil society as necessary to defend democracy against the threat posed by modern state bureaucracy, which seeks to encompass more and more of social life. Rather than posing a problem, as in earlier Marxist accounts, civil society is now viewed as providing a solution. The self-reflexivity of society and the institutions of civil society are seen as vital to protect autonomous public opinion and the integrity of the public sphere, two pillars of democracy.

The liberal-democratic school and to a lesser degree, the New Left conceive of civil society and its institutions in instrumental terms vis-à-vis the state – protecting the public sphere from the intrusive state, influencing state policy, or altering the regime type – and not as a distinct site for governance and reform that is independent of the state.

7.3 CIVIL SOCIETY AND STATE

The relationship of civil society to the state is often depicted as confrontational and zero-sum. This may be the case in certain situations. But in most cases the state and civil society are mutually dependent for survival. Civil society requires governance to survive and governments, at least democratic ones, draw their strength from civil society. The relationship of civil society to the state can take many forms: co-optation and manipulation of civil society by the state, deep penetration and influence over the state by certain civil society actors, productive tension between the two in a context of overall agreement on the political and economic framework, contestation over certain fundamental issues, alienation and isolation of civil society organisations from the state, or outright rejection of the state by key segments of civil society. Although interconnected, civil society groups must be distinct from the state if they are to influence governance, and the state must have autonomy to protect the rights of all its citizens.

Another important sphere in the continuum between private life and the state is political society. The concept of political society denotes, at least in democratic states, the realm of formal competition for the acquisition and exercise of state power. Political parties, the primary actors in this realm, seek to mobilise public support and to constitute winning coalitions in the formal competition and management of state power through elections and the constitution of legislatures. Civil society is distinct from political society. While they seek to influence the rules of the game and affect policies, civil society organisations do not organise themselves on a partisan basis to aggregate interests and formally compete for state office.

To conceptualise civil society without reference to economic society – especially the market – is to miss crucial insights into civil society and its operation. As observed, eighteenth-century conceptions of civil society in Europe were rooted in the recognition of the market as a distinct public realm and the competition arising from growing specialisation and division of labour as a problem for social order. Subsequently, Marx linked civil society to a particular state in the development of capitalism. Today, New Left intellectuals posit civil society as a defence against the encroachment of the state and the market and the threat of global capitalism. By assuming socio-economic equality or defining civil society as a nonprofit sector, the Tocquevillean and neo-liberal formulations decouple civil society from the economic sphere such as the “material bases of civil society and the negative effects of the market on civil society are erased from view.” The structural inequality of markets has consequences for political and civil societies.

7.4 POLITICAL REGIMES

The term regime is used widely but quite loosely in political science. It is quite often applied to a particular type of government, i.e., democracy, aristocracy, autocracy, dictatorship and so on.

7.4.1 Democracy

Democracy is a legislative system in which all citizens exercise direct and equal participation in the development, proposal and passage of legislation into law. Even though it is identified as government of the people, by the people and for the people, there is no specific definition of democracy. Equality and freedom have been identified as important characteristics of democracy since ancient times. These principles are reflected in all citizens being equal before the law and having equal access to the legislative process. For example, in a representative democracy, every vote has equal weight, no restrictions are applied to anyone wanting to become a representative, and the freedom of its citizens is secured by constitutional rights and liberties.

7.4.2 Aristocracy

Aristocracy is a form of government in which a few of the most famous citizens rule. It largely means rule of the best. The concept evolved in Ancient Greece, whereby a council of famous citizens was commonly used and contrasted with “direct monarchy” in which an individual king held the power. In Rome, The Republic consisted of an aristocracy as well as consuls, a senate, and a tribal assembly. The Republic ended with the death of Julius Caesar on 15th March, 44 BC. Later, aristocracies primarily consisted of an elite aristocratic class, privileged by birth and often wealth. Since the French Revolution, aristocracy has generally been contrasted with democracy, in which all citizens hold some form of political power. In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes describes an aristocracy as a commonwealth in which the representative of the people is an assembly by part. Simply put, a government in which only a certain part of the general public can represent the public.

7.4.3 Monarchy

A monarchy is a form of government in which all political power is passed down to an individual, usually hereditary, known as a monarch or king, or queen. As a political entity, the monarch is the head of state, generally until their death or abdication, and “is wholly set apart from all other members of the state.” Historically, the notion of monarchy may

emerge under different circumstances. It may grow out of tribal kingship, and the office of monarch (kings) becoming typically hereditary, resulting in successive dynasties or “houses”, especially when the leader is wise and able enough to lead the tribals. A state of monarchy is said to result that reveals the relationships between resources, communities, monarch and his office. Even in antiquity, the strict hereditary succession could be tempered by systems of elective monarchy, where an assembly elects a new monarch out of a pool of eligible candidates. The concept has also been modernised and constitutional monarchies where the title of monarch remains mostly ceremonial, without, or with very limited political power.

7.4.4 Dictatorship

Dictatorship can be defined as a government controlled by one person, or a small group of people. In this power rests entirely on the person or group of people, and can be obtained by force or by inheritance. A dictator may also take away much of its peoples’ freedom. In contemporary usage, dictatorship refers to an autocratic form of absolute rule by leadership unrestricted by law, constitutions, or other social and political factors within the state. In other words a dictatorship is a form of government that has the power to govern without consent of those being governed while totalitarianism describes a state that regulates nearly every aspect of public and private behaviour of the people. In other words, dictatorship concerns the source of the governing power and totalitarianism concerns the scope of the governing power. In this sense, dictatorship a contrast to democracy and totalitarianism and opposes pluralism – wherein the government allows multiple lifestyles and opinions.

7.4.5 Republic

A republic is a form of government in which the people, or some significant portion of them, retain supreme control over the government. The term is generally also understood to describe a government where most decisions are made with reference to established laws, rather than the discretion of head of state, and therefore monarchy is today generally considered to be incompatible with being a republic. One common modern definition of a republic is a government having a head of state who is not a monarch. The word “republic” is derived from the Latin phrase *res publica*, which can be translated as “a public affair”, and often used to describe a state using this form of government.

Welfare State: A welfare state is a concept of government where the state plays the primary role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens. It is based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. The general term may cover a variety of forms of economic and social organisation.

7.5 CIVIL SOCIETY’S RELEVANCE IN ASIA

Although it has gained prominence since the 1980s, the concept of civil society has a longer history in Asia than is commonly acknowledged. In Japan, for example, the 1920s and early 1930s witnessed the emergence of new socio-political forces, such as trade unions and “new religions” that were not under state domination, and interest groups mushroomed in the first two post-war decades. Civil society was a widely used term in the post-World War II period. Deploying an idealised notion of civil society in Britain and

France, Japanese historians and social scientists characterised Japanese society as immature and lacking the ethos of civil society. Prescriptions for post-war Japan ranged from the democratisation of family life to the encouragement of free enterprise in the commercial sector through the adoption of modified Western political and civil arrangements.

Beginning in the early 1990s, however, growing distrust of politicians and bureaucrats and the inability of the state and the private sector to respond to social needs contributed to disaffection with government and a re-invigoration of the non-profit or third sector. The dramatic shortcomings of the state in responding to the great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake and the outpouring of voluntary effort boosted the image and role of civil society organisations in Japan.

Although the term civil society itself was not used, self-governing associations that sought to influence state politics and policies were a feature of several Asian countries both during the pre-colonial and colonial eras and in the post-independence period. In India, for example, the origins of civil society may be traced to the emergence of a number of social reform movements in the mid-nineteenth century that questioned the caste system and position of women in the society. In British India, peasants established resistance groups, collected funds for litigation, and sent petitions to the British government of India. Peasant groups, and elements of the exploited classes often organised and mobilised themselves independently – posing a dilemma for the educated bourgeois leadership of the Indian nationalist movement in the early twentieth century and sparking a controversy in the Indian National Congress.

The growing prominence of civil society in democratic transitions throughout the world, including Asia, has stimulated a great deal of thinking about the concept. Civil society has been used as lens to understand politics and deployed as a key variable to explain democratic political change, especially in developing countries. Many analysts view civil society organisations such as Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland as crucial elements in the collapse of communism. Those who took part in the dramas that unfolded in Eastern Europe have emphasised the importance of civil society. It has been widely argued that civil society is the key to the survival or defeat of totalitarian political regimes.

Most of the best works on civil society are grounded in the experience of the southern, central, and eastern European countries. Experiences in Latin America inform some of the major works on democratic transition and consolidation and indirectly, civil society.

7.6 THE ASIAN CRISIS AND REGIME CONVERGENCE

The onset of the Asian economic crisis in 1997 had profound implications for ideas about alternatives to economic and political liberalism in the region. The crisis instantly generated confident attacks on “Asian Capitalism” the developmental state and authoritarian regimes. These assaults came from both within and beyond the region and involved a conjuncture of forces for economic and political liberalism, sometimes intersecting with each other’s reform agenda but not always.

For neo-liberals, the crisis was seized upon as evidence that finally “Asian Capitalism” had failed. Led by the imperatives, they embarked on a drive to promote a range of market-oriented reforms. This was ironic, given that accelerated exposure to international market forces as a result of liberalising reforms in banking and financial sectors during the 1990s

had played a role in producing the crisis. However, a neo-liberal argument quickly surfaced that laid the blame on the inadequacy of the supervisory, regulatory and other governance institutions. The term “crony capitalism” was quickly adopted as a depiction of corrupt state-business relationships. It was suggested that capital flight reflected concerns about the absence of predictability and credibility in governance regimes in the region.

As neo-liberals saw it, the crisis had demonstrated the need for a convergence towards the same institutional arrangements to be found in the advanced capitalist economies. Asian political and economic arrangements were now derided as a system that was incompatible with the requirements of globalised markets. In particular, however much “Asian Capitalism” may have managed some reconciliation with industrial development, these economies were now embarking on structural transformations that involved mobile finance capital and far more stringent institutional preconditions.

The IMF and like-minded institutions led the economic critique of the Asian model. Following the crisis, a modified neo-liberal position acknowledged that markets alone were unlikely to generate desired economic outcomes but required supporting institutions. The emphasis shifted to the need for “good governance”, transparency and related institutions that were expected to rein in rent seekers and the developmental state.

Politically liberal critics, many having little in common with the neo-liberal economic camp, also seized on the crisis for evidence of a link between political liberalism and the sustainability and advancement of capitalist markets, rendering authoritarianism redundant. The idea grew out of a modernisation theory of the 1950s and 1960s but had been challenged by the capacity of various authoritarian regimes to preside over increasingly sophisticated market systems. Following the crisis, however, the absence of developed civil societies, media freedom and other liberal political institutions subjecting powerful elite to scrutiny and accountability were considered to have contributed to the crisis. Improved market information and more effective market discipline, it was argued, required the dismantling of authoritarian regimes and further democratisation in Asia.

In the countries most affected by the crisis, economic turmoil was accompanied by political tumult. There were changes of government in Thailand, South Korea, and Indonesia and in Malaysia, while the ruling coalition held, political struggle saw Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim arrested and jailed. In all of this, the opposition of Dr Mahathir, with his apparent rejection of the IMF, attacks on hedge funds, and his destruction of those who favoured Anwar’s “neo-liberal” policies, has been overdone. The deeper level of opposition revolved around the shape of political regimes, the role of the state and national development strategies and was widespread.

7.7 WAR ON TERRORISM AND POLITICAL REGIMES

The elevation of security concerns within US foreign policy in the ‘war on terror’ heralds new challenges for the development of neo-liberal globalization, which may see political concerns return to centre stage. Whereas the post-Cold War period witnessed an unprecedented privileging of the neo-liberal economic reform agenda, not this is to be balanced by considerations of how to contain terrorism.

It is important to note that, while the renewed security emphasis represents a return of sorts to the Cold War era of political and economic concerns, there is at least one

significant difference: the interests of capitals in Western Europe and East Asia are not necessarily congruent with either US economic or military dominance, as was the case in that earlier era. The US's post-Cold War period emphasis on the role of the multilateral institutions dominated for managing globalisation had some appeal for Europeans. However, the terror/security emphasis has seen the Bush administration de-emphasise these institutions, suggesting a further site for conflict.

It is apparent that 'war on terrorism' changes the context in which neo-liberal globalisation because the interests of US capital in having markets opened are moderated by security concerns. This changed context has empowered neo-conservatives within the US administration, whose perspectives about markets has long been tempered by more traditional foreign policy emphases – or at least a different appreciation of the nexus between US economic and political power – than had been reflected in the earlier reliance on multilateral arrangements.

In other words, the 'war on terrorism' indicates that an economic-security nexus has emerged. This is evident as Iraq and the West Asia more generally are so critical for the oil supplies that drive US economic expansion that they become a security concern.

It is evident that political regime type was to matter little in rewarding supporters in the 'war on terrorism', as the US found itself requiring the co-operation of assorted authoritarian regimes. Reminiscent of the Cold War period, the US-sponsored 'fight for freedom' meant that political democracy could wait while the 'war on terrorism' was fought. Indeed, this has already seen a strengthening of anti-democratic forces in the region. Not only did authoritarian regimes in Malaysia and Singapore become strategic sites in opposing terrorism, but the exercise of official powers of detention and surveillance expanded considerably in the region and beyond.

7.8 TRENDS IN REGIME TYPES, 1990-2005

There has been an overall increase in democracies as proportion of total regimes (a 13 percent gain from 1990 to 2005). This shift (in which the proportion of democratic regimes in the world reached 50% for the first time in history) is a consequence of not only the third wave of democratisation and the end of the Cold War, but also a 5 percent increase in democratic regimes between 1999 and 2005. Most of the increase in democratic regimes, however, has been due to a rise in electoral democracies, the modal regime type from 1992 onwards. There has not been a corresponding rise in liberal democracies, which have barely increased since 1990.

Similar to the democratic regimes, there has been important variation in the trajectories of different types of authoritarian regimes. The number of closed authoritarian regimes has declined precipitously between 1990 and 2005. Most of the drop in closed authoritarian regimes was due to the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the downtrend continued between 1999 and 2005. In contrast to closed authoritarian regimes, hegemonic authoritarian regimes rebounded after the end of the Cold War, more than doubling from 1992 to 2005.

More volatile have been competitive authoritarian regimes. This type surged after the end of the Cold War as incumbents of closed or hegemonic authoritarian regimes, facing incredible international and domestic pressures, were forced to open their political systems.

Once a regime becomes a liberal democracy, it is almost guaranteed to remain one. Electoral democracies have proved similarly durable. But there have been even fewer incidences of electoral democracies becoming liberal democracies. In other words, once a country has reached the level of an electoral democracy, it rarely slides backwards—but it even more rarely improves to the level of liberal democracy.

7.9 THE DECLINE IN CLOSED AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES AND THE RISE OF HEGEMONIC AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

One of the striking trends illustrated by mapping the post-Cold War regime types is the steady decline in closed authoritarian regimes. The key initial driver for this trend, of course, was the end of the Cold War itself and the global spread of democratisation. Part of this is due to the stabilisation (or partial stabilisation) of war-affected countries, such as Liberia, Rwanda, Congo-Brazzaville, Haiti, Uganda, Yemen, Sierra Leone, and Sudan. Rulers of these countries sought to hold multi-candidate elections as a means to legitimate and consolidate their political control (which many initially gained by force). These rulers, however, exploited the recent and ongoing instability to squelch the opposition and ensure they prevailed overwhelmingly in the election. Consequently, many of these regimes became hegemonic authoritarian regimes, contributing to the corresponding rise in this regime type. It is also these regimes that explain why, perhaps surprisingly, African countries made up a plurality of hegemonic authoritarian regimes since the 1990s.

7.10 SUMMARY

Political regimes have evolved over a period of time. But it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that political regimes were associated with states. After Aristotle who talked of state and regimes, perhaps the most profound analysis of political regimes was given by Rousseau, Locke and Hobbes. The political regimes have ranged from autocracy, monarchy, democracy, dictatorship and so on. The evolution process has brought the democratic welfare state system as the most stable and benevolent form of regime that encourages people's participation in administration amongst other things.

7.11 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What are the different types of political regimes? Examine them at length.
2. What is the relevance of civil society in Asia?
3. Discuss the trends in various regime types.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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