CIVIL SOCIETY of Pakistan

CONTRIUBTION, IMPACT, CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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Introduction, Contribution and Impact

Pakistan’s civil society is a very vibrant and has led the struggle for democracy and human rights despite a wide range of blocking forces and challenges. Even in the complexity of terrorist threats, Pakistani civil society has bravely countered extremist’s narratives, help reduce violence and foster a culture of peace and human rights.

The traditional focus of civil society in Pakistan has mainly been on human rights, especially, labour, minorities and women rights, and on social development in rural communities but it has always in forefront in challenging the dictatorships and for the restoration of democracy during the military regimes in the country although they are often less accepted as compared to development or relief work and often find a lot of difficulties and threats.

The overall impact of the civil society initiatives can be gauged from the fact that NGOs in Pakistan are now accepted as partners in social and economic development. Civil society today is a force to reckon within the national arena, functioning under resource constraints and in an unfavorable environment, however their contribution to the country is impressive.

It is estimated that there are approximately 100,000 NGOs operating in Pakistan¹. However, the exact numbers of NGOs in Pakistan are unknown because nearly half of Pakistan’s civil society organizations are unregistered and official registration records are not routinely updated or many of them are not actively operating. Civil Society Organizations includes registered and unregistered organizations including coalitions, trade unions, labor unions, professional associations, faith-based organizations, cultural associations, community based organizations, social welfare organizations, not-for-profit health providers, non-for-profit schools, philanthropic foundations, and voluntary organizations.

The number of CSOs in Pakistan has grown substantially² since the 1980s due to a number of factors. The liberalization of Pakistan’s media has played a critical role in increasing public awareness in favour of human rights, democracy and against extremism and fundamentalism.
The latest trend regarding people’s participation has been that the Youth have joined the non-profit sector and as a result, there has been a growth of youth-led CSOs. Increased mobile and internet connectivity, social media platforms have also created a space to address a wide range of social rights issues.

Challenges faced by the civil society in Pakistan

Pakistan’s civil society faces both external and internal challenges. These challenges are multiple which include the challenges posed by the state’s ideology, state apparatus and non-state actors- religious extremist and fundamentalist groups. Moreover, there are challenges within civil society which needs to be addressed to make its efforts more effective and result oriented.

Challenges by the state’s ideology (official & theocratic forces version)

The official version of state’s ideology almost reflects similarity with those who support Pakistan’s theocratic ideology through Objective Resolution which is part of the constitution as preface. The theocratic mindset have steadily grown in strength since General Zia’s dictatorship and they claim as the true custodians of Pakistan who had fought successfully for Pakistan, to establish a theocratic state for Muslims.

On the contrary the civil society believes that in his keynote speech before the inaugural meeting of Pakistan’s new Constituent Assembly, on 11th August 1947, Mr. Jinnah spelt out the Pakistan Ideology, namely the secular and tolerant vision of the new state.

Denial of the official version of the theocratic ideology of the state and of the Islamic ideologists, the civil society face a lot of opposition and challenges when it comes to its struggle for a democratic and human rights friendly Pakistan. The denial of official version of Pakistan’s ideology, and of the version of theocratic mindset means risking life in Pakistan and to be branded as Western or Indian Agent or to be considered as an (Kafir)) infidel- one of the key challenges for civil society actors.

Pakistan’s Security State Policy

Pakistan continues to maintain its priorities as a national security state which has placed the country in an economic crisis, damaged the social fabric and has contributed to the proliferation of religious extremism.

The permanent institutions of the state– the military and bureaucracy – have maintained a dominant political position and siphoned off a disproportionate share of public resources under the guise of ‘national security’. Public opinion had been forged to grant legitimacy to this ideology by emphasizing the threat posed by neighboring countries.

The national security ideology over time was used as justification for military coups, state repression against underrepresented ethnic groups and the patronage of religious militancy.
In this environment, the civil society of Pakistan has always spoken for the political process needs to flourish and the dominance of the people’s power rather than of the military establishment. Therefore the security state mindset creates problems and challenges for the rising voices against the security state policy of the military establishment.

**Threats: a foremost challenge for human rights voices**

In Pakistan, if you are a human rights defender or a group that speaks for human rights, democracy, peace and you chose to raise questions against the official or the version of extremist mindset- you are risking your life as can be seen by the killings in 2011 of the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, and the Federal Minister of Minority Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, who were targeted in relation to their efforts to protect minorities, and their opposition to Pakistan’s draconian blasphemy and other discriminatory laws and policies and by the recent murder of Parveen Rehman in Karachi.

Pakistan is and has been a difficult place where the human rights defenders and democratic or progressive forces face severe threatening situation- they face sever threat calls, their whereabouts are being monitored, phones are tapped, fabricated cases are registered, there are forced disappearances, and many are ultimately killed.

The threat generally comes from state’s security apparatus, religious extremist groups and other powerful entities including landlords, factory owners, outlaws etc.

The government has failed to establish an effective national policy of protection for Human Rights Defenders or to combat impunity by effectively investigating and prosecuting those responsible for attacks against them, including those resulting in extra-judicial killings.

**Challenges within the civil society:**

**a) Lack of conceptual clarity on democracy and human rights**

The concepts of human rights and democracy lack not only prevail among the general public but even among the activists e.g. considering human rights and democracy as a Western Agenda, and connecting it to a particular religion rather than focusing on international standards. This is due to the influence of the anti-human rights and anti-democracy mindset prevailing in the society which is well supported by the state apparatus including the education system.

If you will talk about non-discrimination and equal treatment of the Muslims and non-Muslims “In Pakistan, you shall be branded as an enemy, agent or a traitor- even some of those may oppose who claim to be progressive and liberals.

**b) Lack of mechanisms to support the human rights defenders under threat**

Despite the fact that Pakistan is one of the most dangerous places for human rights defenders, however the Pakistan’s civil society itself has not been able to establish any
support mechanisms/system for human rights defenders under threat. Especially, the human rights defenders who work in the remote areas and are less popular get more threat but less support.

**Policies and actions required from the government to address those challenges?**

- A policy shift- security state to democratic state which respects peoples power and promotes democratic and human rights values. A policy which is practically against religious extremism and fundamentalism.

- Government needs to develop national human rights institutions. The National Human Rights Commission needs to make functional immediately.

- An effective national policy for the protection for Human Rights Defenders or to combat impunity by effectively investigating and prosecuting those responsible for attacks against them, including those resulting in extra-judicial killings.

**How can the international community (international democracy networks and CSOs support the work more effectively?)**

- Pakistan Specific “International Advocacy Campaigns” to support Pakistan’s civil society for a national policy for the protection of human rights defenders and other human rights issues.

- Help develop civil society support mechanisms within the civil society for the human rights defenders under threat

- The greater support for Pakistan’s Civil society would be to help building the capacity of civil society to work for democracy coupled with its principles and beyond electoral democracy.

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<i>Khawar Ghumman, “Over 100,000 NGOs Operate in Pakistan: Minister,” Dawn.com, June 29, 2009.</i>