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**Mistaking “Governance” for “Politics”:
Foreign Aid, Democracy and the Construction of Civil Society**

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Through a long and uneven process of diffusion, the idea of civil society has entrenched itself within a diverse array of cultural and intellectual settings. One of the contexts into which it has been “received” is what can loosely be termed the development profession. The community of scholars, consultants, activists, and policy analysts that influence policymaking in national governments, international agencies and non-governmental organisations have constructed an elaborate discourse around the role played by civil society in the process of social, economic and political change in post-colonial societies. Because of the influence of this community on foreign aid¹ priorities -- which today encompasses issues of how political life is organised -- it occupies a unique niche in contemporary political theory, representing a common locus for both the reception of the idea of civil society and its retransmission to aid-recipient countries.

Scholars attempting to bridge the gap between political theory and development studies have, in general, performed admirably in holding multilateral aid agencies to account for the hypocrisy of their policy statements on civil society. In perhaps the best treatment of this issue, David Williams and Tom Young expose the emptiness of the World Bank’s stated commitment to respecting indigenous African political traditions.² The Bank’s enthusiastic support for civil society, they argue, is nothing less than a backdoor attempt to transform African societies from the ground up by substituting a new understanding of individual political subjectivity -- for it is only through such a novel basis for the “self” that the accompanying features of an open political sphere and a “neutral state” can perform the roles assigned to them in liberal political theory and neo-liberal economic policy.

¹ This term is defined broadly to include all financial transfers (in the form of loans and grants) from governments, international organisations, multilateral financial institutions, or private charities in OECD countries to either governments or non-governmental organisations in economically less-developed countries (LDCs).

² David Williams and Tom Young, “Governance, the World Bank and Liberal Theory”, *Political Studies* (1994), XLII, pp. 84-100.

While this has proven a useful exercise, particularly insofar as it indicts the often sanctimonious community of northern non-governmental organisations as collaborators in the process of social re-engineering, there is less validity in pursuing what some might consider the logical next step -- namely, exposing the extent to which the aid agencies' conceptualisation of civil society represents a "misreading" of political theory. The main charge is that the complex ancestry of the term is not acknowledged by practitioners working within the development field. In fact, the multiplicity of meanings behind the term civil society makes it pointless to condemn foreign aid agencies for failing to adhere to one or another definition. Just as other cultures have developed indigenized versions of the notion of civil society, the aid community has taken this most promiscuous of ideas and fashioned it to suit its own unique culture and purposes. There is as little justification for demanding that the United Nations Development Programme adopt a Lockean rather than Gramscian conception of civil society as there is for expecting the usage of the term in Chinese political discourse to conform to the meaning ascribed to it by Plato. Different circumstances produce different meanings, and these change over time in response to unpredictable influences. This is one of the main premises of this volume.

There is one crucial difference in the case of aid agencies, however, which is their intentionality. They are deploying considerable economic and political resources to bring about change. Because the notion of civil society is thus employed instrumentally, we are justified in seeking to determine whether the logic which underpins the particular conception aid agencies have developed is consistent with the achievement of their stated objectives, and whether it is compatible with other principles to which they are ostensibly committed. The conclusion reached is that, on both counts, it is not.

The materials on which this critique will be based are not the familiar sweeping statements of the World Bank, which is barred by its Articles of Agreement from engaging in programmes or projects with a specifically political component.³ (While the Bank effectively skirts this prohibition by redefining political issues as questions of efficient administration, hence its emphasis on "governance", its statements on civil society remain for the most part on a fairly elevated plane of abstraction.) The far more active agents in the project of attempting to build civil societies in the south are individual donor governments. It is the foreign aid programmes of bilateral donors that have seized most energetically upon civil society and attempted to provide substance to the term. We will focus on the detailed programmatic priorities of the most zealous actor, and the one devoting the most resources to this effort -- the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) -- but the

³ The most important of these are *Sub-Saharan Africa: from Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1989), *Governance and Development* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1992), and *Governance: The World Bank's Experience* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1994). For more detailed statements, see the publications of the World Bank's Senior Policy Adviser in the Africa Region's Technical Department (written in his "personal capacity" and therefore expressing views that "should not be taken as reflecting those of the World Bank"): Pierre Landell-Mills, "Governance, Civil Society and Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa", paper prepared for the Annual Conference of the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics, 1992; P. Landell Mills and I. Serageldin, "Governance and the External Factor", *Proceedings of the World Bank Conference on Development Economics* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1991); and P. Landell-Mills and I. Serageldin, "Governance and the Development Process", *Finance and Development* (1991), 29, pp. 14-17.

views of other actors in the development community will also feature prominently in the analysis.

Foreign aid programmes of advanced capitalist “northern” countries have identified civil society as the key ingredient in promoting “democratic development” in the economically less-developed states of the “south”. The logic runs roughly as follows. Development requires sound policies and impartial implementation. These can only be delivered by governments that are held accountable for their actions. Accountability, in turn, depends upon the existence of “autonomous centers of social and economic power” that can act as watchdogs over the activities of politicians and government officials. Civil society consists of both the associations that make up these “centers” and the “enabling environment” that permits them to operate freely. It is an arena of public space as well as a set of private actors. Therefore, aid to the “democracy and governance sector”, as it has increasingly come to be known within the profession,⁴ must be earmarked to support both individual associations as well as the political milieu in which they carry out their functions.

With minor variations this story is embedded in the thinking of most bilateral aid agencies and multilateral financial institutions.⁵ While the preservation of individual liberties is deemed by most agencies to be a good in itself, it is the contribution of individual rights to engendering and maintaining democracy and promoting sound government policy and economic performance that primarily animates aid policy. By funding organised groups within developing countries, aid agencies seek to create a virtuous cycle in which rights to free association beget sound government policies, human development, and (ultimately) a more conducive environment for the protection of individual liberties.

From the standpoint of the role into which civil society has been cast in promoting this equilibrium, there are several problems with this model. The most serious shortcoming is that aid agencies expect too much of civil society. In order to justify its reliance on civil society for so many different missions, USAID has assigned a range of meanings to the term. Each use is, in effect, context-dependent. There is nothing inherently wrong in this. The notion of civil society as mutable, something capable of adapting to new configurations of power, might even appear an attractively flexible idea. The problem arises when efforts are undertaken to operationalize these varying conceptions by building (or “fostering”, or “supporting”, or “nurturing”) civil society through the application of foreign aid. It is in their attempts to wed theory to practice that USAID and other donors have effectively stripped the notion of civil society of any substantive meaning. This is not to say that there are no empirical referents to the term in each of these various definitions. In each instance it is clear which types of associations qualify as constituent elements of civil society, and which do not. Rather, the main difficulty is that the definitions are not capable of producing, in a

⁴ This term was used in a number of unpublished papers presented by development practitioners at a recent workshop on “Civil Society and Foreign Aid”, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 6-7 June 1996.

⁵ Many bilateral donors have not developed individual policy positions on the relationship between civil society and good governance. Officials in such agencies often refer to the statements of intergovernmental organisations in which they participate, such as the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC). See, for instance, “DAC Orientations on Participatory Development and Good Governance”, OECD Working Papers, vol II, no. 2, Paris, 1994.

coordinated way, the three main outcomes assistance to civil society is designed to produce: (1) transitions to competitive politics, (2) the “consolidation” of fledgling democracies, and (3) the establishment of market-oriented economic policies, and subsequently positive developmental performance.

To put it slightly differently, in order to make the case for civil society’s pivotal role in achieving one of the three objectives, the concept is defined in ways that preclude it from contributing to the other two. This disjunction is remedied by specifying, when referring to the other two objectives, alternative definitions of civil society that render its ability to achieve them more plausible. Unfortunately, the political reality in which events unfold is rather more messy and unpredictable. The dynamics of political contestation are not inclined to change course in order to accommodate the finely crafted theorising of aid-policy analysts. Since the three objectives are meant to reinforce one another in a self-sustaining system, the USAID conception of civil society is fatally flawed. The instrumental nature of the term cannot contain its multiple meanings.

Above all, donor conceptions of civil society represent not a misreading of political theory, but a misreading of history -- particularly with respect to the political dynamics which underlay regime change, the entrenchment of a democratic order, and the evolution of economic policy. It is difficult to determine whether, in fact, these misapprehensions have generated the tame (and ineffectual) conception of civil society to which donors have become attached, or whether it has been necessary to portray civil society in such sterile terms in order to justify the expenditure of scarce aid resources in the pursuit of what in fact constitutes an ambitious political agenda. If the former is true, then donor agencies are guilty of extreme naivete. If the latter, then extreme cynicism. One can only suspect a partially conscious mingling of the two. The important point is that in either case the vision of civil society on which aid policy is based is incapable of achieving the three desired outcomes.

To understand why this is the case, we must pay particular attention to the ways in which dynamics within one process can have “spillover effects” for the others. Despite its pronouncements on the need for careful sequencing, USAID’s policy, in effect, pretends that the three objectives operate in isolation -- and therefore that civil society can be represented differently in each case. Political reality makes this untenable. By examining some of the issues that arise in the interaction, first, between democratic transitions and democratic consolidation, and second, between both of these and the making of economic policy, we will be in a position to appreciate the impossible task that aid donors have set for themselves.

From Regime Overthrow to Democratic Consolidation: Advocates, Interests, and the Dynamics of Political Movements

It is at first difficult to grasp the sterility of USAID’s conception of the relationship between civil society and democracy because, as we have mentioned, it attributes a range of different meanings to civil society.⁶ In its policy statements, these meanings are sometimes

⁶ It should be noted that donor agencies are not alone in attempting to define civil society in ways that exclude its less savoury manifestations. See, for example, Naomi Chazan, “Africa’s Democratic Challenge”, *World Policy Journal*, vol. IX, no. 2 (1992), pp. 279-307.

given different labels and arranged within matrices to indicate the functional contribution of each to the goals of effecting transitions to liberal politics, consolidating democracy and ensuring accountable governance. The need to take “a more operational approach” is the justification for failing to engage with the “considerable theoretical abstraction and debate in the academic literature”. USAID aims to bypass the widespread “disagreement about how to define ‘civil society’ and set its conceptual boundaries”.⁷ Their goal is to assist the decision-makers within USAID “in designing and evaluating civil society investments in the democracy sector”.⁸

One of the most suspect attempts to reorient the definition of civil society in line with its diverse objectives was a 1996 Programme and Operations Assessment Report. This document indicated a conscious shift in terminology, from the term “civil society organizations (CSOs)” to “civic advocacy organizations (CSOs)”. This was meant “to highlight the activist and public interest nature of the organizations USAID seeks to support with democracy funds”.⁹ Sensibly enough, this definition includes “labour federations”, “business and professional associations”, and “environmental activist organizations”. But the wider context makes it clear that USAID is interested in these groups only to the extent that they “engage in or have the potential for championing adoption and consolidation of democratic governance reforms”.¹⁰ What they are attempting to support -- through the funding of specific associations -- is the acceptable, public-spirited face of civil society. There are two problems with this.

The first stems from the inconsistency between the logics behind economic and political aid. Political aid, in the form of funding for civil society organizations, attempts to locate the “true democrats” capable of pressing for a “political opening” -- that is, a recognition by a repressive regime that increased participation is justified. In seeking out such committed idealists as strategic allies, however, USAID is violating the sacred neo-liberal logic of allocative efficiency that underlies its economic aid programmes. Northern aid agencies and multilateral financial institutions have spent the better part of two decades attempting to persuade developing country governments that economic planning, in which state bureaucracies attempt to “pick winners” from among the range of industries and firms within their national economies, would inevitably lead to a sub-optimal allocation of resources, and ultimately to rent-seeking and the creation of powerful interests wedded to the system of preferences. The message was that attempting to second-guess the market would not work. And yet the very same donors are attempting to do precisely the same thing in what they have termed “the democracy sector”. They are, in effect, distorting the free operation of the “political market” by funding groups within “civil society” which they consider likely to support democracy.

⁷ USAID, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, “Constituencies for Reform: Strategic Approaches for Donor-Supported Civic Advocacy Programs”, USAID Program and Operations Assessment Report No. 12, February 1996, p. v.

⁸ Ibid, p. v.

⁹ Ibid, p. vi.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. viii.

While it may be possible to justify these interventions by claiming that they are designed to correct the “market distortions” of authoritarian rule, it is in the course of practical application that they become troublesome. The very existence of funding for “pro-democracy” advocacy organisations tends to attract other, less altruistic individuals and groups. A recent example of how this can lead to what, from USAID’s view, can only be considered undesirable outcomes is the case of the July 1996 *coup* in Burundi. The leader of this revolt, Major Pierre Buyoya, received \$145,000 over the previous three years from USAID’s “democracy and governance” budget. It was channeled to Buyoya’s Foundation for Unity, Peace and Democracy for seminars and consultations among non-governmental organisations on how to promote democracy and human rights in Burundi.¹¹ While he may have been motivated by the best of intentions -- Buyoya orchestrated the country’s first free elections in 1987 -- the ousting of the civilian regime of President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya by a military junta is certainly not what USAID’s policy documents advocate.

Apart from such blatant power-grabbing, there are other more subtle difficulties with the USAID approach to funding organisations operating within civil society. Most worrying is the extent to which even interest groups who are committed to overthrowing a repressive regime -- say, an association of prominent business leaders -- may not be particularly concerned with promoting the type of competitive politics to which donors are ostensibly committed. While they may genuinely oppose the way in which the authoritarian regime has governed, there is also a distinct risk that what business leaders prefer is a more efficient oligarchy, one in which they attain a measure of privileged influence, of perhaps the sort they may have exercised before the regime’s predatory behaviour reached the point of pathology which fomented widespread dissent. In fact, the establishment of democratic politics may result in a diminution of the influence such interests once enjoyed, and which they might again be enjoying thanks to considerable sums of foreign assistance. As the political situation becomes more fluid, foreign aid may actually help to place such interests in a privileged position to pursue their self-interest, at the expense of the public interest. USAID and other donors would like us to believe that they have the bureaucratic capacity to filter the genuine advocates of democracy from those who might wish to play the aid game until such time as new circumstances make other, less savoury, options more attractive. Their own neo-liberal logic argues otherwise.

The reason why this is particularly troubling is that the point in time when such interests -- they are formed from self-interest, after all, though they might wish to make common cause with other “principled” groups in oppositional activities -- is precisely the moment when the question of consolidating democracy arises. Once a transfer of power to an elected government has been effected, there is a great temptation for some interests to throw their support behind a leader, a party, or a coalition of elites in which they will enjoy disproportionate influence. The case of Zambia under Frederick Chiluba, in which powerful interests within civil society have lent support to a newly installed democratic government which engages in tactics similar to those that discredited his predecessor, Kenneth Kaunda, underscores the importance of this logic. The revised USAID strategy of supporting “civic advocacy organisations” is an attempt to isolate and support the democratically inclined aspect of individual associations, while ignoring the fact that such groups possess interests of

¹¹ “U.S. Paid Burundi Coup Leader”, *The Observer* (London), 28 July 1996, p. 20.

their own that may eventually diverge from those of aid agencies as well as of their one-time comrades in the struggle against despotic rule. They want to fund Dr. Jekyll, but not Mr. Hyde, refusing to acknowledge that they are inseparable. The irony is that this sort of wishful thinking about the motives of political actors should come from a development agency which has built its entire policy framework around unsentimental rational-choice explanations of political and economic behaviour.

The second problem with attempting to “define-away” the multifaceted nature of actors that operate within civil society is that it leads to a sort of historical amnesia. Explaining this will require a consideration of the wealth of conceptions of civil society available to those responsible for formulating aid policy. Indeed, a notion like civil society eventually reaches a point where it develops such a large corpus of theorising that there emerges a very considerable secondary literature, consisting of synthetic reviews which attempt a taxonomy of meanings. None of these is capable of doing complete justice to a term as complex as civil society. Gordon White’s typology of civil society’s meanings, however, is particularly useful for our purposes because it indirectly highlights the extent to which donor thinking relies not on one wrong or inappropriate definition, but on an array of detailed specifications, any one of which can be invoked depending on which developmental objective it seeks to achieve.¹² (For his part, White sensibly limits himself to one clearly defined usage of the term for his own work, an analysis of the emergence of voluntary associations in China during the period of economic reform.)

White argues that within the intellectual tradition that views civil society as the sphere of associational activity operating between the state and the family -- itself a subset of the vast range of conceptualisations -- there are three further subdivisions. First, there is the relatively restrictive definition centred on the version of civil society that Hegel (and in a different sense Marx) had in mind, one linked explicitly with the transition from primordial affiliations to those based on economic interests, consisting of associations “rooted in an autonomous sphere of economic activity based on private property and regulated by markets”.¹³ This would include trades unions, chambers of commerce, professional associations, and consumer lobbies. A second, more inclusive, definition considers any type of association, regardless of its nature, as part of civil society. This can include, in addition to those groups listed above, such elements as religious fundamentalist organisations and ethnic associations centred on perceived kinship links, however distant. White considers such a definition too inclusive to be meaningful, as such a “usage conflates ‘civil society’ with society”.¹⁴ The third definition takes as its frame of reference a dominating state and a repressed society, and thus includes within the realm of civil society movements which arise in opposition to the state.¹⁵

The problem for the civil-society promoters is that, unlike White, they are not prepared to limit their claims as to what civil society can achieve, and so they are drawn into the

¹² Gordon White, “Prospects for Civil Society in China: A Case Study of Xiaohan City”, mimeo, January 1992.

¹³ Ibid, p. 3

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ The most thorough elaboration of this conception is Jean-Francois Bayart, “Civil Society in Africa”, in Patrick Chabal (ed.), *Political Domination in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

analytical trap of attempting to include too many of these subdivisions within their notion of civil society. This leads to definitional inconsistency. For the purpose of dislodging an authoritarian regime, for instance, USAID is willing to stretch its definition of civil society to include virtually any mass organisation that can bring pressure to bear on the government. This even encompasses “first-tier associations” -- that is, those of “a more ascriptive nature (kin, clan, ethnic, or religious)”.¹⁶ When discussing the later task of consolidating democracy, however, these groups (which correspond to White’s second category) are nowhere to be found in USAID’s vision of civil society. They have been surreptitiously erased from the “CAO strategic logic”.¹⁷ But political reality works rather differently. Such mass movements have a tendency to live on beyond the transition phase. As mobilizers of identities which cut across sectoral interests, their actions continue to affect the organisations contained within the more restrictive definition of civil society. Their persistence as agents in the structuring of patronage networks also impinges upon efforts to promote the type of market-affirming civil society that aid programmes would like to see entrenched. While it is possible for USAID to refuse them funding once their usefulness in assisting the transition from authoritarian rule has been exhausted, ethnic associations mobilized for political purposes cannot simply be wished away. Their role in bringing about the demise of a dictatorial regime brings with it a sense of empowerment that can embolden such movements to make further demands for a different type of society and polity. These organisations need to be integrated into the matrix of competitive politics -- as they have been in India¹⁸ -- rather than cast as obstacles on the road to modernity and good governance.

That donor agencies are not unaware of the downstream implications of an inclusive approach to civil society during the period of democratic transition is evident from their approach to other associational entities. Anticipating the difficulties that emerge when attempts are made to “consolidate” a newly installed democracy, USAID explicitly excludes political parties from all of its definitions of civil society, terming them part of “political society”¹⁹. This is an attempt to nip the problem in the bud. While there is ample theoretical precedent for such an exclusion, USAID’s stated rationale for doing so -- that parties seek to capture, rather than to influence the exercise of, state power²⁰ -- is dubious. It is not until this logic is extended to the point of excluding from its operational definition of civil society those organisations with close links to political parties that it becomes manifestly untenable. To assert that political parties can and ought to remain distinct from the social groups it is their function to reconcile is to assign them a role as dispassionate interest aggregators, shorn of ideology and immune to the pressures of power. There is little empirical justification for

¹⁶ USAID, “Constituencies for Reform”, p. 2.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 5-11.

¹⁸ The classic account of how caste identities have adapted to democratic politics in India is Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

¹⁹ USAID, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, Programme and Operations Assesments Division, “Civil Society and Democratic Development: A CDIE Evaluation Design Paper”, 24 February 1994, p. 5.

²⁰ USAID, “Constituencies for Reform”, p. 3.

such a view in either the recent spate of democratization -- the "Third Wave"²¹ -- or in the second wave that followed decolonization from the late 1940s through the mid 1970s.

Poland's Solidarity movement, perhaps the greatest single inspiration for the renewed interest in civil society among the donor community during the 1990s, rested upon a complex web of relationships between groups with overlapping memberships, cemented together by charismatic individuals. While Solidarity did not begin life officially as a "party", it effectively became one, and well before the transfer of power was complete. And it was the links between the movement's political core and its organisational satellites that transformed it into such a formidable political force.²² Had USAID's "strategic logic" criteria been in effect, the party linkages of many of the associations that provided Solidarity its legitimacy would have disqualified them from receiving funding. What USAID is anxious to avoid is the co-optation of associations by political organisations that are likely soon to gain control of the state. This is an attempt to prevent the re-emergence of authoritarian rule under another banner, to preserve the fragile creation of civil society so that it may go on contributing to the maintenance of the democratic order. However laudable a goal, it in effect puts the "cart" of consolidating democracy before the "horse" of effecting a democratic transition. While the current state of relations between the African National Congress and the civic associations that fought apartheid in South Africa is a topic of much concern, no one seriously believes that efforts should have been made to cleanse this branch of civil society of its association with the ANC in the period prior to the ending of white rule.²³

Not only does this excessively cautious approach to civil-society funding risk robbing pro-democracy movements of their force; in its obsession with maintaining the "autonomy" of centres of social and economic power, it jeopardizes the healthy development of "political society". Even if the realm of parties and the party system is considered beyond the pale of civil society by USAID's policy analysts -- better left to organisations like the German political foundations²⁴ and the funding institutes run by the two main political parties in the United States²⁵ -- they cannot escape the consequences of insisting upon a strict divide between political parties and associations. Where parties become divorced from either

²¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

²² See the analysis of Poland's twin processes of economic and political liberalisation in *World Development*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1994). -- AWAITING EXACT CITATION

²³ For an account of the difficulties of this relationship, see Kimberly Lanegran, "South Africa's Civic Associational Movement -- ANC's Ally or Society's 'Watchdog'?: Shifting Social Movement-Political Party Relations", *African Studies Review* (1995), vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 101-26. For an intelligent analysis of how South Africa can reconcile the flaws in both Gramscian and liberal conceptions of civil society (a dilemma which afflicts the aid agency conception as well), see Mark Orkin, "Building Democracy in the New South Africa: Civil Society, Citizenship and Political Ideology", *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 66 (1995), pp. 525-37.

²⁴ M. Pinto-Duschinsky, "Foreign Political Aid: The German Political Foundations and their U.S. Counterparts", *International Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 1 (1991), pp. 33-63.

²⁵ Thomas Carothers, "The N.E.D. [National Endowment for Democracy] at 10", *Foreign Policy*, No. 951 (1994), pp. 123-38.

organized sectoral interests or “principled issue”²⁶ associations (environmental advocacy groups, women’s organisations), the resulting vacuum can often be filled by less appealing forces. Mobilisation around exclusive social identities is certainly not what aid agencies would like to see happen, but in cases such as Kenya and Malawi this is a prominent trend, and has undermined to a significant extent the otherwise welcome ascendancy of civil society. It has been aided by the failure of parties to build strong relations with sectoral interests and principled issue associations.

Developments in Indian politics over the past 20 years represent a similar divergence between high politics and the dynamics of civil society. While this is an extremely complex case, counteracted to a substantial degree by the deep roots that democracy has struck in India over the past half-century, there has been, and continues to be, an alienation of party politics at the national level from specific organised constituencies.²⁷ The xenophobic, majoritarian politics of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been a major beneficiary of this trend. Another related phenomenon is what has been termed the “criminalisation of politics”. This is not merely the corruption of high-level elected and bureaucratic officials, but the wholesale entry into mainstream political parties of notorious underworld figures, who are welcomed by established party bosses because of their hold over formidable political networks. Organised crime syndicates have proved easily adaptable as adjuncts of party machines where party links with trades unions, farmers’ organisations and other, more conventional groups in civil society have been weakened. We cannot blame USAID for India’s political afflictions. But its sanitized vision of civil society, consisting of public-spirited watchdogs quarantined from political society, indicates a failure to learn from such lessons. It is not a recipe for the establishment of democratic politics in other countries even less well-endowed than India. It is a well-intentioned, but unrealistic, attempt to ensure good governance.

The Double-Edged Sword of Autonomy: Democracy, Accountability, and Economic Policy

At the root of the tortured attempts of development practitioners to equate civil society with all that is wholesome in political life -- citizen involvement, public-interest advocacy, self-help -- is a preoccupation with promoting good governance. This is understandable, even admirable. In practice, however, it turns out to be something of a mirage. The problem is with how the conception of good governance is formulated -- in particular, the explicit bias towards neo-liberal economic orthodoxy. Market-centred policies, it is everywhere implied, are “sound”, while those that deviate from this logic undermine both efficiency and welfare.²⁸

²⁶ This term is drawn from Kathryn Sikkink, “Principled Issue Networks and the Politics of Human Rights Advocacy”, *World Politics* (1993) -- AWAITING EXACT CITATION

²⁷ This process can be characterised as a return to the pattern found during colonial rule. As N.B. Dirks has argued, British colonialism -- its institutions as well as discourse -- transformed caste into an extremely rigid social formation detached from political processes, creating what Dirks calls “a specifically Indian form of civil society”. N.B. Dirks, “Castes of Mind”, *Representations* 37, pp. 56-78.

²⁸ See, for instance, USAID, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, “Civil Society and Democratic Development in Bangladesh: A CDIE Assessment”, *USAID Working Paper No. 212*, August 1994.

There is nothing to prevent USAID and other agencies from pursuing such policies. It is beyond the scope of this paper to dispute either the wisdom of such programmatic priorities or the moral right of development agencies to use aid as a lever with which to effect them. The question is whether the characteristics they ascribe to civil society in democratic transitions/consolidations are consistent with the roles envisaged for it in policy making and implementation.

As we have argued, the dynamics of political movements and the constantly shifting motives which characterise political life bear little resemblance to the sanitized vision of civil society which USAID and other agencies seek to promote. But even if we accept the portrayal of politics as a struggle of ideals, and therefore the conception of civil society as consisting of principled issue advocates, there are logical inconsistencies which undermine any claim to an operational compatibility between the various objectives of organisations like USAID. The initial impetus for investing such great hopes in civil society as an agent of change illustrates this. The flourishing of associational life in many regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, was rightly interpreted by many political scientists and development practitioners as representing a force capable of threatening to undermine unresponsive regimes. According to a wide and varied literature, a vast array of collectivities -- from associations of peasant farmers to village-level groups demanding greater local control over natural resources -- had become “disengaged” from the state.²⁹ This disengagement had, in many instances, served as a proxy for overtly political dissent. The ability of civil society thus defined to contribute to regime change, to place democratic politics on a broader footing, and to hold future governments accountable to the rule of law instilled great optimism in the development community.

Many of these communities are in fact capable of providing the basis for a more participatory, though mediated, form of politics. They can and do help to broaden the sphere of politics beyond the formation of elite consensus. Their ability to contribute to good governance is, however, restricted by the way in which this term has been redefined. The goalposts have, in effect, been pushed back. If one reads the fine print, the concept of good governance no longer refers simply to authority which is accountable. It is the taking of actions consonant with sound policy, which in turn, is construed as market-oriented economics. This raises a fundamental dilemma for the efforts of USAID to promote civil society as the basis for ensuring good governance. The social groups whose associational activities originally made them such attractive allies in the eyes of donor agencies often possess orientations far from harmonious with neo-liberal orthodoxy. Simply because they disengaged economically from particularly rapacious states does not mean that they are uninterested in a strong role for the state in the future. Indigenous environmental groups, for instance, in many cases have ideas about the economic management of natural resources that do not accord with the “pricist” stance of governments committed to implementing donor-backed structural adjustment policies.

In fact, many of the associations which inspired the original faith in the power of civil society to act as a check on state power arose in opposition to the imposition of such policies

²⁹ See, for instance, Richard Sandbrook, *The Politics of Africa's Economic Stagnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

by authoritarian regimes. They were formed to bury neo-liberal economics, not to praise it. Governments that are swayed by such voices would, by definition, be providing accountable governance but not good governance -- an anomaly that further undermines the credibility of the aid agencies' conception of civil society. In other words, even advocacy (as opposed to self-interested, potentially rent-seeking) groups in civil society might not desire the policies that aid agencies seek to promote. The assumption that they will is rooted in the logic of the type of democracy that aid agencies envisage.³⁰ If the government fails to embrace liberal economics, then it is not seen to be operating within the context of liberal politics. The adoption of neo-liberal policies thus become the *sine qua non* of civil society.

On a more basic level, what USAID and other donor agencies fail to recognise (or at least openly to acknowledge in their policy statements) is that free-market economics removes many decisions from the purview of not only the state, but also the political community, democratically constituted or otherwise. In their zeal to see dominant social groups stripped of their power to subvert public institutions for private gain, they simultaneously disempower subordinate social groups: the associations that come closest to the ideal of citizen involvement will find the political basis for pursuing even mildly radical redistributive projects undermined. The most important reason why this fallacy has remained relatively unchallenged is the ability of aid agencies to point to the adoption of market-oriented economic reform in democratic countries. In this respect, India, which is not only democratic but also possessed of a vibrant civil society, has thus become a useful weapon in the rhetorical armoury of donor agencies. Its five-year-old structural adjustment programme, while less radical than advocates of shock therapy had hoped for, has nevertheless been far-reaching, greatly exceeding in scope what many commentators had considered politically possible when it was initiated in 1991. The expectation among such commentators was that powerful economic interests threatened by the withdrawal of state subsidies, in alliance with advocates organised on behalf of the poor (who feared that reform would not come with a "human face"), would join forces to thwart efforts to restructure the Indian economy. The Indian case -- in terms of the political sustainability of economic policy reform, if not its economic results -- would seem to support the aid-agency view that governments of countries in which civil society was clearly free enough to hold them to account have nevertheless been willing and able to provide good governance (in the form of neo-liberal economic prescriptions). The equation between good governance, accountability, market economics, and civil society was thus maintained.

The details of the Indian case, however, reveal a more complicated picture -- one which by no means justifies such facile assumptions concerning how civil society is best conceptualised.³¹ One of the main reasons why the Indian reform programme has been able to overcome the political forces arrayed against it is the existence of a federal political system. The logic of economic reform brought many more decisions about economic life to the state level. It, for instance, removed decisions about the siting of industrial ventures from

³⁰ One internal assessment, referring to USAID's support of business associations, argues that "[i]n civil society terms, such assistance could be called a 'democratic capitalism' strategy....", USAID, "Civil Society and Democratic Development in Bangladesh", p. 29.

³¹ The arguments that follow are elaborated in greater detail in R. Jenkins, "Liberal Democracy and the Political Management of Structural Adjustment in India: Conceptual Tensions in the Good Government Agenda", *IDS Bulletin*, vo. 26, no. 2 (1995), pp. 37-48.

the hands of bureaucrats in New Delhi. Politicians heading state-level governments -- representing parties of the left, right, and centre -- joined in the competition to lure Indian and foreign capital to their regions. Significantly, these leaders were free to indulge in such activities because the main electoral preoccupation of politicians operating at the state level is with courting the support of organisations engaged in the mobilisation of politicised social identities (caste, religion, language, sect, tribe). Sectoral interest groups who, under other circumstances, might have had more success with their efforts to undermine reform found themselves subsumed within the matrix of local, primordial politics -- a place in which they were relatively powerless. Thus, in this instance, it was the existence of a particular form of civil society -- one in which ethnic politics was as organised, competitive, and linked to party politics as were the more conventional functional associations -- that allowed the state to avoid "capture" by powerful interests opposed to the introduction of policies deemed synonymous with good governance. Fixated on promoting the emergence of modern solidarities, USAID's conception of civil society does not allow for the practical utility of such hybrid forms of democratic politics, even when these are instrumental in effecting their preferred outcomes.

Another of the reasons why the Indian government was able to succeed in introducing market-oriented reforms also flies in the face of USAID's strategy for promoting civil society. The extremely close relations between trades-union federations and political parties helped to defuse the resistance of organised labour to a number of important reform measures. While, as with other reforms, the Indian government did not take as bold a stance on labour issues as some neo-liberal advocates had hoped for, it did take a number of actions that were previously considered unthinkable given the extent of trade union power: the partial privatisation of public-sector firms; the introduction of numerous changes to work practices in the banking sector; the offering of voluntary retirement schemes; and (in some regions) the turning of a blind eye by state governments to illegal management lockouts by private firms. It was not only the ruling Congress party, but also the centre-left and communist parties, that reined in their affiliated trades unions, limiting the impact of anti-reform protests by independent labour organisations. While donor agency rhetoric condemns the establishment of links between civil society organisations and political parties, it fails to recognise the extent to which the ability of governments to achieve policy reforms which donors themselves deem consistent with good governance can rely upon the control of political leaders over such interests.

In their eagerness to protect social groups from the potential for government repression, donors appear at times to have forgotten their earlier concern with insulating policy elites from the exercise of undue influence by powerful interests. Most foreign critics, after all, blamed the persistence of statist economic policies of the type that India followed before 1991 on the excessive power of organisations operating in civil society. Yet, in its elaboration of a five-step procedure "for determining investment priorities in civil society"³², USAID advocates supporting "sectoral" reforms. Though these "often are not specifically aimed at strengthening democracy, investments in sectoral areas such as environment and natural resources, private sector development and NGOs, may yield substantial multiplier

³² USAID, "Constituencies for Reform", p. 5.

effects for systemic reform in democracy and governance”.³³ The significance of these is that they “can expand the number and size of autonomous enclaves relatively well insulated from government predations”.³⁴ This prescription presumes that governments have been the sole predators, when far more often it is alliances between holders of state power and actors in the private sector that are responsible for the great many ills that beset developing societies. The idea that “increasing sectoral autonomy” will help to “replace co-optation by government” flies in the face of neo-liberal logic, in which inordinate influence of interest groups is viewed as the main culprit.

That donor agencies ignore the role played by constraints upon organised interests in effecting market-oriented reforms in developing country contexts highlights an even graver defect in their conceptualisation of the relationship between democracy and civil society. The way in which USAID’s civil-society assistance programmes are formulated ignores the manifestly undemocratic nature of many “actually existing democracies”, including the United States. Many (if not most) long-established democracies, as well as those of more recent vintage, exhibit traits that contravene the hallowed principles of accountability, participation, and unrestricted freedom of association. This can be seen quite clearly, though donors fail conspicuously to do so, in complex models of how democracies incorporate fragments of civil society, such as the one elaborated by Philippe Schmitter.³⁵ Schmitter views modern democracy as an interlocking network of five “partial regimes”, rather than a unified system based upon clear lines of accountability. The nature of each regime is determined by the “action situations” in which political actors are engaged. “Electoral regimes” structure relations between legislatures and political parties, while “concertation regimes” organize the political role of particularized interests, such as capital and labour. Yet, clearly some of these regimes can rely upon restrictions upon associational freedom. As Olson famously pointed out, the exit options of trades union members are often limited by organisational rules sanctioned by law.³⁶ And the “clientelist regime”, centred on the personalistic networks constructed by local party bosses found in many democracies, is “formed on the basis of exclusive instead of inclusive participation of relevant social actors, thereby violating a key constitutive principle of the national democratic regime”.³⁷

Rather than revealing a shortcoming of Schmitter’s analysis, these features lend authenticity to his model, demonstrating how imperfect is the interface between civil society and democracy as it exists in practice. They also highlight how incompatible is the match between the sanitized version of civil society depicted by aid agencies and the reality of the only functioning examples to which they can aspire in both north and south. Western donors have gone from supporting dictatorship during the cold war to insisting upon a immaculate and idealised form of democracy that exists nowhere but in their imaginations. In order to

³³ Ibid, p. 7.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Philippe C. Schmitter, “The Consolidation of Democracy and Representation of Social Groups”, *American Behavioural Scientist* (1992), 35, pp. 422-49.

³⁶ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

³⁷ James R. Scaritt and Shaheen Mozaffar, “Toward Sustainable Democracy in Africa: Can U.S. Policy Make a Difference?” *Working Paper No. 171*, African Studies Centre, Boston University, 1993, p. 5.

support that vision of democratic purity, the idea of civil society has been distorted beyond recognition.

Conclusion

In his analysis of why communism failed to provide the basis for a lasting political order in east and central Europe, Ernest Gellner pointed specifically to the absence of civil society.³⁸ But that which he considered lacking was not what aid-agency policy has created by the same name. The latter vision is too clean-cut and invested with unambiguous virtue to perform the functions to which Gellner was referring. Perhaps the need to spend public funds on promoting civil society requires aid policy analysts to portray it in such noble terms. The UNDP, for instance, equates civil society with “social movements”, which by definition are constructed around ideals.³⁹ This sort of conceptual legerdemain undermines the intention of understanding the contribution of civil society to achieving desirable economic or political outcomes. Gellner depicted a more sensible dichotomy: “In an important sociological and non-evaluative sense, the Bolshevik system did constitute a moral order. By contrast, and this is perhaps one of its most significant virtues, Civil Society is an a-moral order”.⁴⁰ In what should be their moment of triumph, the West’s development professionals are in danger of repeating the errors of the communists by attempting, in Gellner’s words, to “sacralize” the social and political order. To invest civil society with a moral dimension is not only to misrepresent its historical role in the regulation of social and political life, but also to deprive it of its capacity to express, and thereby paradoxically to contain, the aspirations for power, influence, and control over truth which characterise the human condition.

The blueprint from which aid agencies are attempting to construct civil societies resembles nothing so much as a textbook of the sort issued to high school students studying a subject that was once called “civics”. It uses the term “governance” as a euphemism for “politics”, in the process grossly underplaying the contingencies which influence the formation of opposition movements, the entrenchment of political order, and the exercise of state power. Civil society emerges as a sort of political ombudsman, reflecting the values of impartiality, fair play, and commitment to public welfare. This niche -- its value orientation and functional role -- in fact bears a striking similarity to the one that donor agencies see themselves as occupying in relation to the countries to which they give aid. They are “in” but not “of”, providing guidance, but not asserting interests. Perhaps it should not surprise us, after all, that aid agencies have created civil society in their own image. What we are witnessing in this latest re-export of the notion of civil society is not only its depoliticisation and sacralization, but also its bureaucratisation.

³⁸ Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994?)

³⁹ R.C. Riddell and A.J. Bebbington, *Developing Country NGOs and Donor Governments*, Report to the Overseas Development Administration (London: Overseas Development Institute, 1995), 23-24.

⁴⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, p. 137.

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