

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETIES IN DEMOCRACY: THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION

Ali Mohamed Farah



Gözlem - Saha 08

Introduction

The Civil society context has reappeared in history once again during the East European and Latin American revolutions that took place in 1970's and 1980's. Although the concept exists since the Polis state of Greece it rediscovered with this events. From then on, it has been in the nucleus of the world politics. From 1990 on the concept of civil society has been propagating even with the hands of international institutions like the IMF, United Nations, and World Bank and the European Union.

By civil society we refer the sphere out of the public, where people can gather with their consent and free will. This is only a short description of civil society. The definitions made by many scholars are in the fore coming sections.

This relationship between the concept of civil society and democracy and democratization also has

been the focal point after the revolutions in East- ern Europe and Latin America. This notion has influenced the Arab societies as well. The democratization activities that started in December 2010 in North Africa were guided by the civil societies. In Tunisia many trade unions and associations took part of the revolution.

Civil Society Definitions

The concept of civil society has developed through history. However, it has been widely used since the democratization process in Eastern Europe in 1980's. Most of the Social Science researchers see it as a sector between the public and private sphere. Jürgen Habermas has described that the concept of public sphere and private sphere had existed in Greek polis state but it was not used in

today's sense (Habermas, J, 1991, p. 2-4). Thus, it has emerged from this age old sectors and took different meanings and shape throughout history.

For Jürgen Habermas, civil society is made up of more or less spontaneously created associations, organizations and movements, which find, take up, condense and amplify the resonance of social problems in private life, and pass it on to the political realm or public sphere. Ralf Dahrendorf sees the concept of civil society as “part of a classical liberal tradition, and characterized by the existence of autonomous organizations that are neither state-run nor otherwise directed from the central political power” (Anheier & Regina 2005, p. 54).

As it is seen the civil society has its roots Western political philosophy. However it made its greatest success in Eastern Europe, where civil organizations played a crucial role in the overthrow of the socialist regimes in the region with international political support (Hawthorne: 2004; Benhard: 1993; Foley & Edwards: 1996). After this surprising achievement, the concept first was ‘reimported’ into Western political literature and then was adopted by the rest of the world as a magic cure for all the ills in regions where oppressive states prevailed, such as Latin America, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Establishing or strengthening civil society via the financing of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) became a quick fix for policy makers and international donors to achieve consolidation of democracy (Cevik & Tas, 2013, p. 3).

The idea of civil society goes back to the social contract and natural law theorists, such as Pufendorf, Hugo Grotius, and, famously, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Although they differ in argument, interpretation, and purpose, they generally oppose civil society to the state and see it as the realm of free activity. Hegel and Marx see it as both opposed to the state and as providing the state's socioeconomic foundation and reason for being: civil society is the realm of appetite and self-interest, and thus of class struggle, such that the state is the true realm of liberty as it transcends mere egoistic interest (Hegel), or “the state is the political and

legal organ of the dominant class employed to control the subordinate classes and to legitimate the former's rule (Marx)” (Fontana, 2006, p. 53). According to Hegel, “civil society is a confusing and oppressive phenomenon”. Only a powerful state can regulate it. In Marx, civil society is a kind of bourgeois obscurantism for the proletariat's revolutionary consciousness (Şimşek, 2004, p. 47).

Civil society has also been one of the most debatable concepts among the social science scholars. Tocqueville, Montesquieu, Gramsci and Habermas are also one of the contributors to the concept. For Adam Smith, trade and commerce among private citizens created not only wealth but also invisible connections among people, the bonds of trust and social capital in today's terminology (Anheier & Regina, 2005, p. 54-55).

Taylor (1990) describes that there is also an institutional approach to studying civil society by looking at the size, scope and structure of organizations and associations, and the functions they perform. The different perspectives of civil society are not necessarily contradictory, nor are the various approaches to understanding it necessarily rival; on the contrary, they are often complementary and differ in emphasis, explanatory focus and policy implication rather than in principle. Hence, he looks closely at different senses and lists the characteristics of ideal civil societies. To him, in a minimal sense civil society exists where there are free associations, in a stronger sense, civil society exists only where society as a whole, can structure itself and co-ordinate its actions through such associations which are free of state tutelage. As an alternative or supplement to the second sense, we can speak of civil society wherever the ensemble of associations can significantly determine or deflect the course of state policy (Taylor, 1990 p. 98).

The term civil society has many definitions. Yet, there is no exact agreement on its precise definition, though much of the confusions are related to the conceptual framework that composes the term. The source of this confusion is in the characteristics of civil society. Some focus on the extent of

state power, politics and individual freedom, and others focus on economic functions and concepts of social and capital integration. This is the reason there no definite and a single universal definition.

Early European political philosophers mainly defined civil society in the context of the relationship between the state and the society. For Hobbes and even more clearly for Locke, the state originates in, is ultimately answerable to, and is therefore identified with (but not identical to) civil society.

The definitions of Civil society in relational terms are also reflected in recent literatures for example Francis Fukuyama (2001) defined this term as a tool that serves to balance the power of the state and to protect individuals from the state's power (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 11). What makes society civil is the fact that it is the locus where citizens can freely organize themselves into groups and associations at various levels in order to make the formal bodies of the state authority adopt policies consonant with their perceived interests (Pytrzik, 2001). In the absence of civil society, the state often needs to step in to organise individuals who are incapable of organising themselves. According to Fukuyama (2011), the result of excessive individualism is therefore not freedom, but rather the tyranny of what Tocqueville saw as a large and benevolent state that hovered over society and, like a father, saw to all of its needs (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 11).

In the words of Ernest Gellner, civil society is the set of 'institutions, which is strong enough to counterbalance the state, and, whilst not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of peace and arbitrator between major interests, can, nevertheless, prevent the state from dominating and atomizing the rest of society'. According to Gellner 'no civil society, no democracy' (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 11). He defines the civil society as a set of diverse non-governmental institutions, which is strong enough to counter-balance the state, and, whilst not preventing the state fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can never theless prevent the state from dominating

and atomizing the rest of society (Şimşek 2004, p. 51). Many scholars consider a vibrant civil society as one of the prerequisites to the consolidation of democracy (Cevik & Tas, 2013 p. 11).

The World Bank defines civil society as "the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Hence, from the definition of the World Bank we can include many kinds of labour organizations, NGOs, relief organizations, faith based and non-faith based organization. In general, any group which out of the public administration and government influence that can put pressure on the state, can be in the scope of the civil society.

The civil society index describes civil society as "the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organisations and institutions to advance shared interests" (TÜSEV [Türkiye Üçüncü Sektör Vakfı], ny, p. 24).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defined the civil society as "the multitude of associations around which society voluntarily organizes itself and which represent a wide range of interests and ties. These can include community-based organisations, indigenous peoples' organisations and non-government organisations."

Berh & Siitonen (2013) Affairs defines it as the intermediary space between market, state and family where individuals organize voluntarily around diverse and often conflicting sets of issues. According to a standard definition, it is "the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, and autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules." (Berh & Siitonen 2013, p. 6)

Pytrzik, (2001) claims that what makes society civil is the fact that it is the locus where citizens

can freely organize themselves into groups and associations at various levels in order to make the formal bodies of the state authority adopt policies consonant with their perceived interests (Pytrzik, 2001). Kenneth Newton supports this idea and even puts in societal context describing it as a social context in which there is a broad range, great diversity, and high density of social networks and formal and informal social organizations. He continues, "It is a contextual property of societies in which individuals live, not a characteristic which individuals carry around with them" (Newton, 2001, p. 208).

The confusions on the definition of the civil society arises from the perspective it is viewed and the role attributed to the citizens and state. Here as we can clearly observe the actors that play the main role are the citizen, the market and the state. This is the reason there is no yet a definite and single definition for the term. However, we can deduct from the above definitions the following definition:

Civil society is the assembling of civil individuals to form independent, non-governmental, voluntary associations, institutions, organizations who could play a role of intermediary and power balancing between the state and the people. It is an inevitable tool for a democratic society.

The Relationship Between Civil Society and Democratization

Civil society and democratization have close relations. As it is seen in the previous sections civil society is associated with freedom and a mechanism of putting pressure on the state. Democratization is a word derived from democracy. Scholte (2001) defines this term (democracy) as a condition where a community of people exercise collective self-determination. Through democracy, members of a given public -a demos- take decisions that shape their destiny jointly, with equal rights and opportunities of participation, and without arbitrarily imposed constraints on debate (Scholte, 2001, p. 7).

On the other hand Boutros Ghali (1996) defines democratization as a process which leads to a more open, more participatory, less authoritarian society. According to Boutros-Ghali, Democratization is a little bit different from democracy which is a system of government which embodies, in a variety of institutions and mechanisms of the ideal of political power based on the will of the people (Boutros-Ghali, 1996, p. 1). Samuel Huntington (1991) regards democratization as the process of transition from authoritarian rule to multiparty liberal democracy. It is the process of transformation from authoritarianism to democratic governance (El Medni, 2013, p. 16). As it is seen, democratization is process, where- as democracy is composed of participation, institutions and consent.

Upreti (2011) contends that the enabling environment for civil society is directly proportional to the governance circumstances of the state. Strong civil society makes the state accountable, where as a democratic and accountable state ensures its citizens enjoy freedoms of speech, assembly, and association. The existence of an enabling legal framework makes it practicable for such social groups to function (Upreti, 2011). Civil society came to be seen as crucial not only to promote political liberalization and pave the way to democratic reform, but also to support institution building and improve the quality of democracy (Fioramonti, 2010, p. 86). Monika (2014) attributes the role of civil society to its contribution to the emergence of participatory civic culture, dissemination of liberal values, articulation of citizen's interests, and to creating mechanisms for influencing institutional responsiveness (Monika, 2014, p. 35).

Hence, when civil societies are stronger than states both politically and morally, they do assume a democratic task. This is why in totalitarian or authoritarian regimes civil societies are either out dismissed or to some extent deprived from some of their rights (Aslan 2010, p. 366). A healthy civil society is considered an integral part of any democratic system of governance. Along with free and fair elections, and accountable institutions, it ensures that the voices of citizens are included

in policy-making (Chatham House, 2013:3). In any working democratic society, civil society is one of the fundamental pillars and a requirement for democracy. Where there is democracy there is civil society, however, it could not be claimed necessarily where there is civil society there is perfect democracy.

Civil society could play an important role in the way to democracy and in the democratization process. (Diamond, 1997) described the two important role of civil society in democracy, these are a) by helping to generate a transition from authoritarian rule to electoral democracy, b) by deepening and consolidating democracy once it is established (Diamond, 1997, p. 25). This could be proved by the role of civil society in the democratization process in Eastern and central Europe, Chile, Indonesia and Philippines in 1970s and 1980s (Benhard 1993; Doherty 2001).

Benhard (1993) described the KOR (Workers Defence Committee) in Poland, which first liberated itself in a struggle for democracy and then put itself in the centre of the struggle, was one of the prominent figures against the struggle of the one-party state. In Hungary, the League of Young Democrats (FIDESZ), In Czechoslovakia, the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS) were the remarkable organizations in the struggle for the democratization process (Benhard, 1993, p. 315-317). Accordingly, civil society was the driving force behind democratization in the region as a whole.

Likewise, The Centre for Policy Dialogue in Bangladesh, for example, provides a forum for dialogue and discussions on governance and development issues among the governance stakeholders from the government, the private sector, civil society and the academic community (AGDI [Asia Pacific Governance and Democracy Initiative], 2008, p. 4). In 1986 in the Philippines, civil societies formed an umbrella NAMFREL, to monitor the elections and exposed the fraud of the then president Marcos which forced him from power. Similarly, in 1987 in South Korea enormous demonstrations by the

student, workers unions and professional groups made huge demonstrations to oust the authoritarian regime paved a way for the democratization process of South Korea (Diamond, 1997, p. 25-31).

In Egypt Kifaya, Youth for Change and the April 6th movement, were central to the January 25th revolution. During the 2011 uprising many independent youth groups emerged. In February 2011, the umbrella group called the Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change (CCYRC), established in 2011, became one of the largest independent coalitions -with local buy-in and consensus from over 100 movements and groups (Alwazir, 2013, p. 2). Women Journalists Without Chains (WJWC) led by the Nobel Prize winner is one of the prominent figures in the Yemeni revolution of 2011.

The Tunisian Case

On December 17 2010, in Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, a self-employed young Tunisian who graduated university named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after he was allegedly harassed by the police while selling vegetables on the street. This event has sparked rage in the country and has been marked as the event that triggered the Arab spring. The rage and revolt that started throughout the country the day after Bouazizi set himself on fire, has ended with the ousting of 23 years long serving Tunisian leader Ben Ali who fled to Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011. This revolution was named the Jasmine Revolution (Heng, 2014, p. 4). The revolution was carried out as a spontaneous civil society movement by people from all over the country, led by neither a particular ideology, nor a particular political figure (Şahin, 2012, p. 162).

The event (immolation of Bouazizi) triggered a long-existing anger and despondency in the country. Demonstrations started throughout the country in a short period of time. The demonstrations were soon covered and transmitted by the country's TV channels, something unusual in Tunisia. For example, Dec. 29 Nessma TV, a private news channel, became the first major Tunisian media outlet to cover the protests, soon Labor unions,

lawyers and opposition groups together with students have joined the protesters. Large sections of the UGTT trade union voiced their support for the demonstrators' demands for reform and called for strike. There was also support from other bodies such as the Tunisian Bar Association, and the people's movement gained new supporters every day. Tunisians from all levels of society and all parts of the country poured onto the streets, organising themselves through internet, mobile phone and verbal communication (Schmidinger, 2013, p. 12). The regime responded with harsh measures. Between January 8-12 6 protesters were killed. However, this never discouraged the protesters and even it escalated more.

The UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail), which was formed in 1946, played a key role in organizing protests. In fact the local branches of the UGTT has played a vital role in the demonstrations, they forced the executive bureau to eventually support protests (Bishara, 2014; Hartshorn, 2013). It is Tunisia's biggest (with 517,000 members) and for many years was also its only union organisation. Centred on the public sector, it includes 24 regional unions, 19 sector-based unions and 21 grass roots unions.

In fact the struggle of the UGTT for the democratization process did not start with the Bouazizi event; it has been struggling for the past three decades. As the cornerstone of the nationalist movement in the colonial era, the UGTT has always played a key role in Tunisian politics. According to El-Asmi (2014) since its formation it has been advocating for freedom and democratization. This had left negative experiences on the members who sometimes resulted in the imprisonment, torture and even assassination of many of its militants (El Asmi, 2014).

The UGTT has played a crucial role in the revolution. It has been organizing and assuring the security of the demonstrators against any threat from the regime. One of the prominent leaders was the secretary-general Farhat Hached who travelled throughout the country reminding Tunisians of the struggle for independence. The UGTT, also

forced the leadership to participate in the revolution from January 10 onwards, was a crucial factor for the success of the revolution that forced President Ben Ali to leave the country on January 14 (Schmidinger, 2013, p. 30). Not only did the UGTT play a decisive role in the strikes, rallies and demonstrations that led to former president Ben Ali's flight. It also lent vigorous support to the occupations of Kasbah Square, which in January and February 2011 led to the fall of the first two transition governments.

Accordingly, the role played by the UGTT during the revolution has been recognized by many inside and outside the country. This is because the UGTT has been addressed and included in the transitional governments also. For example ministers were appointed from the UGTT, however, they later withdrew with their consent (Schmidinger, 2013, p. 30). Thus, the UGTT's central role in the Jasmine revolution is undeniable. It remained neutral and preferred to stay as a pressure group outside the government.

After the revolution, the UGTT has and is playing a major role in the transformation and democratization of the country. It remained as "the only body in the country qualified to resolve disputes peacefully". After January 2011, it emerged as the key mediator and power broker at the initial phase of the revolution, winning trust from political players across the spectrum. It was within the union that the committee which regulated the transition to the elections of 23 October 2011 was formed. It is very important for the UGTT to take this task in a country that its population is hugely polarised.

As it is seen in the previous section democratization is a process. Accordingly the UGTT is in this process for Tunisia. It was also included in the constitution drafting process as well. Likewise, it has played a vital in the political crisis of 2013-2014. It acted as a mediator between government and opposition in order to terminate the political crisis that locked the whole country. Many of the protestors' demands line up with those of UGTT: the resignation of the current government, its replacement by a non-political government, curtail-

ing the work of the Tunisian Parliament, the ANC (National Constituent Assembly), and reviewing top government appointments. One of the most important results of the dialogue that was led by the UGTT through the proposed roadmap was continuity of social dialogue amongst all players that enabled a resolution to the existing crisis.

Attributing the success of the Tunisian revolution to UGTT only will not be both ethical and fair. From the first day of the revolution the Tunisian people in general were participants of the revolution despite their political idea. For example Tunisian lawyers staged large protests in front of the courthouses in Tunis and other cities across the country to protest government abuses and defend human rights. On December 31, the Bar Association called for national demonstrations and staged large protests in Tunis, Sfax, and Djerba.

On the other hand youth associations, bloggers, and women associations also were the focal points of the revolution. To cite some, Tunisian women were on the streets standing together with men, demanding freedom, dignity, the removal of the despotic regime, and the establishment of a solid democracy. Women, as in the other Arab Spring countries, actively participated in the political transition. During the uprisings, many female activists were subjected to violence, sexual harassment, and rape. After the fall of Ben Ali, there was a hope for the protection and improvement of women's rights and liberties, and for the full participation of women in the political transition (Şahin, 2012, p. 162).

Prominent bloggers have also credit in the revolution. The digital networks were used widely. Events went viral on social websites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. For instance, on December 20, 2010 the police fired on the demonstrators, killing two 18-year-olds, Mohamed Ammari and Chawki Hidri, in Menzel Bouzaïene. Many more were injured, but the protestors did not retreat. During that week young bloggers and cyber activists from Tunis and other regions flocked to Sid Bouzid, Menzel Bouzaïene, and other towns to join in the demonstrations and to record and report the

events to the country and the world. Images and videos were posted in the Internet and picked up by international media, particularly Al Jazeera and France 24 (http://webarchive.ssrc.org/pdfs/Alcinda_Honwana_Youth_and_the_Tunisian_Revolution_September_2011-CPPF_policy%20paper.pdf accessed on 25.12.2014). On the other hand bloggers like Slim Amamou (Pirate Party), El Général and Sami ben Gharbia (rapper) were the remarkable internet bloggers during the revolution. Henceforth, as it is seen together with the UGTT, internet bloggers, the youth, women associations and many other Tunisians took part of the revolution.

Conclusion

Although it is not in today's sense, the civil society concept has been existing for centuries before it is defined and put in a framework in today's sense. However, it has become to be researched after the revolutions of 1970s and 1980s. From then on it is in the centre of the world politics. This is because it's strong link with democracy and democratization process.

Civil society can be shortly defined as the assembling of civil individuals to form independent, non-governmental, voluntary associations, institutions, organizations who could play a role of intermediary and power balancing between the state and the people. It is an inevitable tool for a democratic society.

In conclusion, as it happened in the Eastern European countries and Latin America democratization process, civil societies have played crucial role in the democratization process of Tunisia. One of the prominent figures of the revolution was the UGTT. It has played a remarkable role during the Jasmine Revolution in 2010/2011. Even after the revolution the UGTT is playing a significant role in the politics of the country. Thus, civil societies are inevitable on the democratization process for any country willing to take steps to this process.