

# *The Concept of Civil Society: A Theoretical Review*

**Tanvir Anjum**

## **Abstract**

The concept of civil society is referred to a sphere of social order, which lies outside the pale of state, and counterbalances its power by safeguarding the individuals of a society from political control and oppression. This idea was evolved in the eighteenth century and has developed ever since. The article attempts to review the concept and theory of civil society in a historical context, tracing its origin back to the eighteenth century and exploring its current usage and connotations. Outlining its characteristics, the article brings to the fore that the notion is being used as an analytical tool for explaining various socio-political phenomena in the context of state-society relationship. Practically, the idea is being employed as a political slogan for criticising various government policies by activists, and as a normative ideal and model for social organisation. The article suggests that the concept is currently undergoing alterations redefining the relationship between state and society.

## **Setting the context**

The triadic paradigm of social order consists of three constituting sets of structures; the state (the upholder of legal values) is referred to as the first sector, the market or economy representing exchange values is the second sector. These two when combined in one category are collectively

---

Ms. Tanvir Anjum teaches at the Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

referred to as system.<sup>1</sup> However, the third residual structure of the triadic paradigm is the 'civil society'. For this reason, civil society is also referred to as the 'third' or 'independent' sector.<sup>2</sup>

The first constituting set of structures, i.e. the State may loosely be defined as a politically organised section of society or as a political society. It is comprised of a set of authoritative and powerful roles meant to control, order and organise the people.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, state has been identified as a primary locus of political power<sup>4</sup> and at whose disposal the coercive mechanisms have almost always been placed. Therefore, it is likely to exercise absolute power over a society. Thus efforts are made to contain the state's political control and power absolutism. A system of checks and balances is devised to help restrict state power and enable its people to promote their autonomy and freedom of action. Institutionalised arrangements include formal and informal organisations, such as, judiciary, legislatures, political parties, interest groups, particularly economic, cultural, social, developmental, and issue-oriented. These organisations provide the bases for the limitation of state power, indeed the control of the state by society. They tend to monitor and restrain the exercise of power by the authoritarian state. This function has been

- 
1. S.B.A. Kazmi, "Civil Society, Violence and Development Ethics: A Case Study of Northern Ireland", Unpublished M.A. Thesis: University of East Anglia, 1996, 29
  2. Isagani R. Serrano, *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Washington D.C: Civicus, 1994),4.
  3. According to Appadorai, the four essentials of a state include a definite geographical territory, population, government, which is the sum total of the legislative, executive and judicial institutions, and sovereignty, i.e., the power of the state to make and enforce laws with all the means of coercion. A. Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics*, 6th ed. (Madras: Oxford, 1952), 11.
  4. Power exertion is the most fundamental process in political as well as social life that pervades all dynamic political and social phenomena. Power theorists assume that power relations are endemic among all human interactions and they form an inevitable part of societal structure. The concept of power has variously been defined but the essential idea underlying most definitions is that power is the ability to affect social activities or behaviour of an actor. Power is relational and relative. It is not something that is possessed by an actor; rather it manifests itself in an interactional process. An actor may be considered powerful in relation to some actors in regard to certain matters. The exercise of power is usually reciprocal among all participants of the process but it has been assumed that power is mostly unequally distributed among the actors; some possessing and exercising greater power than other actors. For a detailed discussion see Marvin E. Olsen, *Power in Societies* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 2, and Amatai Etzioni *The Active Society* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 314.

