

Civil society organizations in Sri Lanka: Their strengths and weaknesses

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ABSTRACT. The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Sri Lanka has assumed a great significance in the recent years. The author, in this paper, will try to highlight the role and responsibility of the civil society organizations within the context of Sri Lankan politics. It will first discuss the nature of Sri Lankan civil society within the national political process at a point in time when they are unusually active by highlighting the presidential elections of 2005. Second, the study will bring forth some of the inherent weaknesses and strengths of the civil society organizations in Sri Lanka. Finally, the study will produce some important hypotheses about the role of civil society in Sri Lankan politics that can be the basis for further research.

KEY WORDS. Civil society, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, globalization, postcolonial state, governance, state.

Introduction

Most developing countries at present have accepted the process of globalization and in particular, integration and adaptation of their national economies to the global economy. The process was accelerated with the end of the Cold War and the discovery of the fiber optic cable and the wonders it brought about during the last decade of the twentieth century. A need for and the vitality of extra-regional associations based on specific needs have now become a matter of urgency. It is within this scenario that we see the emergence of civil society institutions in South Asia and in particular, Sri Lanka.

In this environment, 'new circles' or entities of power have emerged and assumed varying degrees of power in the developing countries to help the process of governance.¹ They began to influence the respective governments and have come to a status where they have both helped the overall governance of the country while keeping a vigilant eye on the governments in power. At the very initial stages of their existence, they advocated for an open economy with foreign aid and assistance,

investment and trade. At present it has developed to a stage where they have begun to canvass for and popularize free markets, trade and investment². This is while keeping a vigilant check on human rights abuses, corruption, misuse of public and government property and other malpractices associated with bad governance.

Objectives

The role of civil society organizations in Sri Lanka has assumed major proportions as of late. The focus of this paper is on their structure, reach, strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness. An attempt will be made to examine in depth the role of civil society organizations in Sri Lanka by examining their role during the presidential elections of November 2005 and thereby to evaluate the role of the CSOs in Sri Lanka. The author will try to highlight some strengths and weaknesses of the role of civil society organizations in Sri Lanka's politics taking the Presidential elections of 2005 as an example. However, the author is aware that there are strict limits to generalizations that we can make from such a study. Yet, a preliminary survey such as this has two important advantages. First it will show the nature of Sri Lankan civil society in the nation's political process at a time when they are unusually active. Second, the study will produce some important hypotheses about the role of civil society in Sri Lankan politics that can be the basis for further research.

Presidential elections of November 2005 witnessed the two main parties with their loose alliances with minority parties against each other during pre-election time. In that election, the Prime Minister of the party who was also the leader of the party in power, the Peoples Alliance, Mr. Mahinda Rajapakse won the elections with a slim majority of a mere 187,000 votes. This was amidst a boycott of the elections by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who dominate areas of the North and the East of the country. Another unexpected development was with regard to a host of names going missing in the electoral registers on the day of elections. It is in this context that CSOs and their strengths and weaknesses will be studied in this paper.

The focus of the paper will be on two broad themes, first the role of Sri Lanka's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and second the disparities and varying degrees of presence and impact of the CSOs within the country. The paper is organized into three sections. First, it will sketch the history of the introduction of CSOs in Sri Lanka. Second, a case study of three CSOs in Sri Lanka linked to the political developments in the country will be studied and finally discuss some strengths and weaknesses of CSOs in Sri Lanka.

What is civil society?

To arrive at a comprehensive definition of CSOs is a difficult task. The reason for this difficulty is because it means different things at different times, places and situations and thus, remains somewhat unclear. Civil society, commonly accepted, is a sphere of institutions, organizations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests. What this definition does is to list elements and components of civil society institutions which are considered essential. According to Gellner (1994) civil society are institutions which are strong enough to counter balance the state, whilst not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of peace and arbitrator between major interests. It, however, prevents the state from dominating or dictating the rest of society. Neera Chandhoke (2003) defines civil society as the site for the production of critical rational discourse which possesses the potential to interrogate the state. Ajay Mehra says that, "Both society and state are expressions of associational urges of humanity and indicate two different stages of development of social organization" (2003:210). Michael Edwards considers them to be, "all organizations and associations between the family and the state with the exception of business" (2001:5).

Yet, others dispute this definition and go to the extent of including even business within the spectrum of civil society. Paul Casperz in his analysis states that civil society lies "...outside and beyond identifiable and established societal structures or institutions, while being in itself all pervasive, yet elusive and often invisible category..."(2004:204). Some go to the extent of considering Non Governmental Organizations (NGO's) as identifiable with CSOs. This is very much the case in Sri Lanka as well.

It is therefore accepted that defining civil society is a challenge by itself. Casperz himself goes on to say that a way out could be to define an NGO [CSOs] as

an organization existing and functioning in civil society which calls itself a non governmental organization. Those that do not call themselves NGO's,...but yet operate outside the formal structure of society, would be civil society organizations (2004:206).

Civil society has also begun to influence and at present become a vital precondition for the existence of democracy in post-colonial societies where they have now emerged as the watchdogs of the state.³ It is now in the process of policing and refashioning the post-colonial states of South Asia. During the last half a century state-directed activity witnessed the growth of a repressive state apparatus monopolizing the decision making process with regard to political and economic

power. This bureaucratic post-colonial state witnessed this from the time of independence until the 1980's. From the 1980's onward there has been a movement towards more democracy in South Asia, and it is here that the growth of an NGO and the CSO culture becomes more evident. Of course it has faltered in Pakistan and Nepal. Military rule in Pakistan and Bangladesh and the two decades of emergency rule in Sri Lanka saw the emergence of civil society groups that steadily began to challenge the repressive powers of the state. The state tried to dominate at first and then it was challenged. These movements, namely the emerging civil society organizations thus, created associational forms and their primary task, among other tasks, was/is related to curbing the excesses of the state machinery.

At present, civil society institutions in South Asia have evolved because societies of the area concerned are of the assumption that there is 'no way out' of the present status-quo with regards to the political, economic and social set up that is prevalent today in South Asia. One result of such a situation is where civil society institutions have appeared in order to elucidate the ways to good governance and to expel whatever is considered unjust or unlawful through civil society institutional measures.

According to G. L. Peiris, the "irreducible minimum requirements" for civil society to come to exist in South Asia, in general, and Sri Lanka in particular, are as follows:⁴

1. Empowerment: To bring out the best in people to enable the fullest degree of self-expression is the primary objective of empowerment. Thus, the people must be given an opportunity to fully participate in decision making processes. Devolution of power and an easy access to judiciary courts should be made available to the people in order to achieve the beginnings of civil society institutions in South Asia.
2. Participation: Very much related to the process of empowerment is the act of participating that comes into being when one is conscious of their rights in society. Awareness and education becomes a compulsory requirement for such a process to come into being. For example, in India, the creation of a third level of government in the form of a Panchayat along with the federal government and the state governments is one such mechanism of participatory democratic governance.
3. Stability: Stability and continuity of the basic political and constitutional structures in a developing country could be considered another essential requirement for the establishment of civil society. Ad-hoc decisions, mechanisms and instability will hinder civil society institutions from

establishing themselves, for they, plus the people at large will/would lose confidence in the mechanisms of governance at a particular instance.

4. Rationality: Another requirement for civil society to come to exist is for an intelligent and a lively population to be present. In Sri Lanka, with the introduction of universal adult franchise in 1931 and the emergence of a social welfare state from thereon, saw Sri Lanka's literacy rate shoot up to a massive 96% at present as compared to some states in South Asia who record very low rates of literacy.
5. Compassion and goodwill: A genuine compassion and goodwill should be considered as the framework out of which civil society institutions should and will originate. Selfish, narrow-minded, and shortsighted policies will destroy the beginnings and the development of civil society institutions for the betterment of the people.

The author wishes to add another irreducible requirement to this list which is freedom. How can CSOs that are independent of the state, as they should be, grow and thrive if there is no freedom in the society? Modern nation states have accepted the growing importance of this new circle of power, be it whether it is a threat or a companion to the governments in power. Whatever the case is, the CSOs have identified freedom and independence as essential prerequisites for their positive existence.

A political and a cultural environment based on these six principles or requirements will bring out the establishment and the strengthening of civil society in South Asia. At present we in Sri Lanka and South Asia are all going through an epoch of uncertainty and it is the people who have to make a historic decision on the establishment of civil society. This can and will bring about an environment where civil society organizations could and will perform to its best of capabilities in this disparate land in South Asia. People have made the decision to have free CSOs. The tension is thus, between the state and CSOs. The former would like to curtail freedom of CSOs when it is inconvenient. However, CSOs of the more political variety have not permeated all sections of society. Unlike in more established and mature democracies the political culture allows the state to ignore CSOs. For example, Transparency International complaints were ignored by the government during the last election.

Thus, there is clearly a realization that social activism is needed to keep these major institutions in line with their main intentions. This is in fact the main objective of civil society institutions, and they have at present become a check and balance on the arbitrary use of power of the state. With regards to social activism, a

prime example can be obtained from the Supreme Court of India, where through social action litigation Justice Bhagwati and the Supreme Court have widened its powers through judicial interpretation to help the needy, the poor and the defenseless of India.⁵ The Court allows CSOs to use the judiciary for social activism.

A history of civil society in Sri Lanka

Civil society in Sri Lanka has largely been shaped by the colonial experience, especially during British times (1796-1948) and the establishment of the modern state in the first half of the twentieth century (Orjuela, 2004). Colonialism first introduced Christian missionary activity to help, develop and benefit the poor from the nineteenth century onwards. The Baptist Mission (1802), the YMCA, YWCA and the Salvation Army in the 1880's could be traced as the very beginnings of modern organizations in Sri Lanka. As a reaction to this, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim organizations emerged and the Muslim Education Society (1890), the Maha Bodhi Society (1891) and the YMBA (1898) are some examples. Though such social movements grew in Sri Lanka as a reaction to the socio-economic imbalances that were caused by western imperialism, it is an irony to note that even the reactionary organizations that emerged were not indigenous in character.

It is only the CSOs that have developed along the NGO culture with overseas funding who have at present risen to the expectations of the status of CSOs universally accepted. The reasons are many for such a culture or situation to come about.⁶ Foreign NGO's followed in the 1980's and the funding increased with the beginning of the ethnic conflict which turned militant in and after 1983.

In the early 1990's, about one fifth of the total foreign aid received by Sri Lanka was channeled through CSOs, for the foreign donors preferred to channel the funds through them for obvious reasons rather than use conventional methods such as the government, political parties or trade unions. We see the rise of foreign funded CSOs in Sri Lanka which have actively been involved in the social and economic issues in Sri Lanka. This invariably brought about tension between the state and CSOs in Sri Lanka from the 1980's onwards. The state apparatus thus began to restrict the space of CSOs through a process of legislation. For instance in 1980, voluntary service organizations had to register with the Ministry of Social Services (DeVotta, 2004). In 1990, a Presidential Commission was appointed to investigate the flow of funds into international and national CSOs in Sri Lanka and the findings were not very favorable to the CSOs (DeVotta, 2004). The result was to enforce and sharpen the registration requirements for which the civil society institutions reacted sharply. In 1993, upon the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry in respect of CSOs 'The Monitoring of Receipts and Disbursements of

NGO's Regulation No 1' was passed which basically required all CSOs with annual budgets over Rs.50,000 to register with the state and make known their funding sources and expenditures (DeVotta, 2004). This too made space between the CSOs and the state grow wider, but since the monitoring lasted for just one year only the CSO culture seem to have survived.

From recent times, the services of the CSOs with relation to elections have grown in importance. All segments of society in general saw the need for close vigilance and scrutiny of elections and electoral malpractices in the country. Senior citizens, the academia, government servants, the private sector, entrepreneurs of all scales and daily wage earners all appealed, requested and sought the help of CSOs in identifying the election malpractices and frauds that have been prevalent in the last few elections in Sri Lanka and remedy the system all together. Election violence in the form of thuggery and murder, threatening of election officials on duty, rigging and stuffing of ballot boxes, preventing voters to vote, the ordering of pencils to tick ones ballot that could be erased when counting, replacing of ballot boxes with imitations, destroying of ballot boxes are some of the frauds and malpractices during elections.

The CSOs in Sri Lanka with politics as their mainstream have been successful in making all sections of society concerned and conscious of elections in the country. They in turn, have made it their concern to be associated with all aspects regarding election monitoring during election time. The question posed by a scholar is "how and why despite such positive precedents and conditions has Sri Lanka's civil society failed to preclude illiberal democracy and enable positive political change?" (DeVotta, 2004:292).

The presidential elections of November 2005

This particular election was considered a very crucial one due to the prevailing unstable political environment of the country. In 2002, for the very first time the parliamentary majority party was different to that of the party from which the President was elected. While the parliamentary majority party was the United National Party (UNP) under Ranil Wickremasinghe, the President, Chandrika Kumaranatunge, was from the People's Alliance (PA). This situation brought about a scenario where the two entities (Cabinet vs. President) were at loggerheads at varying instances. This being the case, the President, was on the look for a possible dissolution of parliament. She did so in 2004 when the UNP became unpopular because of the rise of the cost of living and also because of the stalemate with regards to the ethnic conflict and the temporary peace that was brought about through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the LTTE in 2002 brokered by Norway. Whatever the case was,

the President was able to bring her party back into power in the Parliamentary Elections of 2004.

The presidential elections of November 2005 was a very clear indication that CSOs or for that matter the NGO's have not been fully successful in achieving their objectives. For example, the people of the North and the East which are considered the war torn areas of Sri Lanka did not participate in the elections.⁷ The non participation in the elections comes in the wake that both the North and the East, together with the whole country is currently enjoying uninterrupted peace that was brokered through a MOU by Norway with the GOSL and the LTTE in 2002. The LTTE very clearly indicated to its people that they were debarred from voting, and the people of the area accepted the ultimatum! This was the situation despite the undying efforts of several CSOs to create an election euphoria in both the North and the East.

Furthermore, political and electoral participation and the attempts to advocate a secular, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and a multi-cultural dimension to political parties and electoral practices have all been sidelined at the presidential elections of 2005. Why this became so is because majority politics that highlighted Sinhala-Buddhist ethos triumphed over political parties, and CSOs that advocated both equality and majority politics with a guarantee to safeguard minority rights and liberties.

Methodology

The author has made use of a case study of three political civil society organizations in Sri Lanka as the methodology to arrive at the conclusions of this work. Direct interviews with the heads of three CSOs that are directly involved in being watchdogs on the politics of the country was conducted. In addition, in-depth discussions with academics from the capital city of Colombo who have done extensive research on CSOs and those who are associated with the relevant CSO entities were carried out to get original information on the role and perception of the CSOs in Sri Lanka. The author justifies the following reasons for choosing these three CSOs for the case study;

1. It shows the complex and often time strained and tense relationship between the state and CSOs.
2. It shows the links and financial dependence of many CSOs on donor funding.
3. It raises questions concerning subservience of CSOs to donor agendas.
4. It illustrates the degree of effectiveness and impact of CSOs on the elections.⁸

The three political civil society organizations that were selected for the study were, a) PAFFREL: People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, b) NPC: National Peace Council and c) TI: Transparency International⁹.

PAFFREL became a distinct political CSO when it came to be considered the first citizen-based election watch in Sri Lanka. A group of NGO's in 1987 getting together to monitor the Presidential elections of December 1988 could be considered the very beginning of PAFFREL. Since then, it has monitored all forms of elections, the last being the Presidential elections of November 2005. According to a brochure of theirs, the PAFFREL is a 'Non profit coalition, working to strengthen and expand democracy island wide, calling on a national network of organizations and volunteers'.

Its main aim is to achieve a true democracy by assisting society at large to advance democratic values. To do this, informing the citizenry of pluralistic values and characteristics of a strong civic culture through the help of other CSOs has been the methodology adopted by PAFFREL. Thus, contact with a wide variety of grass root level organizations has been used for this purpose. The Movement for Free and Fair Elections (MFFE), Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, The Conference of Major Religious Superiors, National Conference on Religion ad Peace (NCRP), Marga Institute, Young Men's Muslim Association (YMMA), Centre for Society and Religions and the National Peace Council (NPC) are several such organizations.

NPC's history dates back to July 1994 when an inter-religious group of individuals and organizations assembled together to direct a campaign against election violence. The result was the National Peace Conference of November 1994 that sanctioned the establishment of the NPC which officially came into being in 1995. The basic objective of the NPC is to constantly highlight the achievement of peace through the negotiation process between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. It also stressed on a just society where differences are acknowledged and conflicts are addressed through peaceful means.

Amongst its activities, the establishment of peace networks consisting of CSOs, community and religious leaders, trade unions and women's groups in several districts across the island are notable. Residential training at the national and local level for civil society and elected officials, on the conflict and how it could be negotiated are notable activities of the council.

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) is the National Chapter of Transparency International (TI), the leading global movement against corruption. TI is the only international organization exclusively devoted to curbing corruption. The over-riding goal of TISL is to lead civil society in Sri Lanka through promoting programs and approaches to eliminate corruption and improve transparency, accountability and good governance in all sectors in the country.

The complex and often time strained and tense relationship between state and CSOs were very clearly seen when the activities of the government during pre-election time were questioned by the CSOs. The watchdog concept of CSOs became more distinct than the CSOs being pro-state or in alliance with the government. This brought and heightened tension between the two sectors. State sector abuses, malpractices, thuggery, and corruption were all looked into by the PAFFREL, NPA, and TI and they were all duly reported to the relevant authorities, the Elections Commissioner and the Bribery Commissioner, and the Police in particular. Thus, a time strained and a tense relationship did exist during election time between the two entities, and the CSOs did their best to make the elections a fairly and a comparatively free and a fair one.

The activity, the expansion and the strengthening of CSOs in Sri Lanka has widened the role, capacity, involvement and the responsibility of the CSOs in Sri Lanka. Having been a purely voluntary service at one time, they have now expanded to such an extent, that they could not possibly be voluntary anymore. Professional expertise and an able staff to process the work has made the CSOs now depend on an institutional framework for their existence. This requires funding and a steady flow of monetary resources for the institutions. This invariably shows the links and financial dependence of many CSOs on donor funding. This has brought about a situation where as PAFFREL noted, "the cost of peace is costing more than the cost of war". A professional and development oriented transformation has brought about such a status and a personality to the CSOs in Sri Lanka.

Very much connected to the above, it raises a critical question concerning subservience of CSOs to donor agendas. This invariably brings us to the realization that the CSOs are both at the mercy and the dictation of the foreign donors. The foreign donors could have a different ideology and objective in financing the CSOs from that of the local workers and the beneficiaries. This has brought about a situation where, however independent a CSO within the country, the foreign donors will eventually influence their mode and code of behavior.

The presidential elections of November 2005 very clearly illustrates the degree of effectiveness and impact of CSOs on the elections. A comparatively free and a fair election was held, except for two very distinct, but unexpected developments that occurred during the course of the election day, namely the boycott of elections in the LTTE controlled areas of the North and the East of the country and the names of particular electorates in the city of Colombo going missing in the electoral registers. With regards to all other abuses malpractices and shortcomings, both by the government in power and the opposition, the CSOs actively put a check on them and duly reported such abuses to the relevant authorities as earlier stated. CSO involvement in the elections was crucial when one learns of the fact that the winning candidate won the elections by a mere 187,000

majority votes. It was a fairly and a comparatively trouble and a violent free elections. The election was relatively "free" in the sense that there was less voter intimidation outside the north and east. But in the North and East, it was not certainly free because of the boycott of elections spearheaded by the LTTE. It also shows how limited CSOs' influence was because LTTE totally disregarded CSO appeals.

Weaknesses and limitations of civil society organizations in Sri Lanka

Positive developments and the numerous checks and balances by the CSOs in Sri Lanka have invariably brought about certain restrictions on the part of the state. Nevertheless, they are also infested with certain limitations and weaknesses. These limitations, weaknesses and/or disparities are all inter-connected, and they all, taken at one instance are the reasons why and how the CSOs in Sri Lanka have developed in the manner in which it has, namely, that the CSOs in Sri Lanka are still within a normative and an evolutionary stage. As one author has pointed out, "naturally their objectives, activities and turfs overlap, creating an interface, which is paradoxically cooperative and conflictual" (Mehra, 2003:212). This is the case with Sri Lanka as well. What are then the inherent weaknesses/disparities of civil society institutions in Sri Lanka?

The spatial limitation of the CSOs is one drawback. Sri Lanka is an island with merely a 25,000 square mile land area with a population nearing twenty million. Nearly 70% of the area is rural and subsistence agriculture has been its main source of revenue. The island at present is going through a difficult process with regards to its economy where inflation has very vividly come to dictate terms. In such a scenario, the activity of the CSOs are very limited. Their activity, availability, goals, objectives, methodologies and concern are all limited to the capital city of Colombo and other major cities in the country. It is only PAFFREL that have come to develop a close alliance with Sarvodaya, a grassroot level organization operable in every district and province except the North-East of the country. Thus, the CSOs are mainly concentrated in the city of Colombo because of the nature of their work, tasks and practical limitations and difficulties, while some other CSOs are based in Colombo while trying to concentrate their work on the rural areas. Lack of a proper infrastructure to manage and coordinate the work that could be done is lost with this disability. The government lacks resources in terms of money plus management for the development of a proper infrastructure on the one hand, and the CSOs lack of resources to develop the proper infrastructure on the other. Because of such a scenario, one of the primary goals and objectives of a CSO which is to reach to the poorest segments of society has not been achieved. In Sri Lanka and even Nepal, the

CSOs and its culture is very much capital city centered. As a result, their focus and spatial range is very narrow. This is not the case in India, for India's spatial range is very large while being very much aware of the local set ups. Thus, the mushrooming of capital city centered CSOs in Sri Lanka can be considered a spatial disparity and a weakness in the proliferation of CSOs in Sri Lanka.

A lack of good management, transparency and accountability is another weakness that was identified during the time. The CSO culture, though it emerged in the immediate post-independence period, has actually begun to evolve and expand only in the 1980's. It accelerated its process with the Tamil militant movement gaining momentum and with the new political culture of corruption, violence, thuggery and murder stabilizing itself as the order of the day. Thus, the activities of the CSOs in Sri Lanka are still in the process of evolving and expanding. It is this very reason that at present the work of the CSOs are very limited to certain areas of the metropolis. Because of this evolutionary nature, good management capabilities, an accountability and transparency are yet to become fully established. The management and the staff at large are still in the process of learning the tricks of the trade.

An antagonistic attitude towards the state can be identified as another weakness and a limitation. The resource personnel of the CSOs doubt each others role and capabilities to one another and have begun to distrust each other. This operational environment and the theorists themselves have harped on the fact that the primary objective of a CSO is to be a watchdog of the state, has invariably made the situation grave. Thus, an antagonism has invariably, but unconsciously developed between the two sectors that at times have made the two respective entities go against each other whenever their existence is threatened.

The inability to influence macro policies of a given era can be identified as another drawback. Since the CSO culture is yet to be fully stabilized in Sri Lanka, the ability to influence the state and its macro policies is to be expected. This is because the CSOs are yet to be fully accepted, respected and honoured for their services at present. The state apparatus also need to fully grasp the advantages of having and making use of the CSOs as a/the fourth branch of government. The modern nation state is still very much in control of all of its activities and is not yet willing to share them with an informal source such as CSOs. All such sources are considered an obstacle to the smooth functioning of government.

Until recently, a lack of exceptional and charismatic individuals in this sector was seen as another weakness. Apart from a very few distinguished personal heading the CSOs in Sri Lanka, the average top management of the CSOs in general do not have high profile personnel to manage the institutions. Apart from the three that were studied for this research and a few others, there is a lack of exceptional and charismatic individuals who have decided to dedicate their services. The

Directors of PAFFREL and TI, are once highly acclaimed civil servants of the Sri Lanka Civil Service. The Director of NPC is also highly qualified legal luminary from Harvard University. However, this is not the case with the majority of the CSOs in Sri Lanka.

Since some of the CSOs were funded from overseas, its employees developed a mentality to see the CSOs as a form of employment and not a voluntary service. While the top management of the CSOs do offer their services on a voluntary basis, the middle and the lower rungs of the staff are recruited to the CSOs purely for the sake of employment. Though this cannot be considered a weakness, the fact remains that the quality and the dedication of/to work is slightly affected. Due office hours, overtime work payments, the inability to cope up with unexpected times and type of work and the like, make the CSO culture a weak one at times.

The CSO culture is comparatively a new development in Sri Lanka and it is yet to be vocal enough to contest the standings of the politicians. Unlike India, the CSOs are not that vocal and they do not contest the state politicians. In Sri Lanka, their identification as a watchdog is still not that very effective. This again, is very much so because as stated earlier, the CSOs are still in the process of evolving themselves in the country. However, at times, PAFFREL and TI, have stated their views explicitly against the state whenever the necessity arose.

The practitioners still try to apply themselves to the local situation through a global perspective. An adaptation to the local needs and to the local circumstances are yet to be fully operative. The Sri Lankan CSOs be, they indigenous or not, are yet to adapt themselves to the local situation. Universally accepted terms and methods are at times forcefully applied to local situations and they do not result in any positive changes to the community. Making use of international observers at the time of elections rather than depending on the locals is one example.

Language barrier between the centre and the periphery which is evident in many of the third world countries can also be highlighted. Capital city centrism has made CSOs mushroom at the center. One reason for this is because either of the parties involved in the transaction is handicapped by a language barrier. It is this very reason why and how CSOs have begun to mushroom themselves in the capital. Their language of instruction is English, while in the rural areas or suburban areas, the language is basically either Sinhala or Tamil. This has brought about a situation where there is a lack of communication between the two parties. It is this reason why some of the CSOs make use of local and informal groups within the locality to be the middlemen between the two parties.

There is no proper measurement to rate civil society organizations in Sri Lanka and this is a limitation itself. There is no proper system of how CSOs could be measured with regard to their success, input or output. There are innumerable number of CSOs with numerous ideas, objectives and strategies who want to

establish themselves for the common good of the country and the locality. But there is no proper system of measuring their consequences in a given context.

The status and the unavailability of details of CSOs in the LTTE controlled areas can also be considered a drawback. This again, is an unidentified question for which no institute or person has a possible answer. There is no proper data or a mechanism of how one could gather information on the status or the activities of the CSO culture in the LTTE-controlled areas. What we do know is that they are intolerant of opposition views. It is known that LTTE does not allow politically independent CSOs to work within their area.

There is a paradox and a conflict between the terms “bonding” and “bridging” with regards to the objectives and the role of the CSOs in Sri Lanka. Associations generating “bonding” social capital have triumphed over associations generating “bridging” social capital (Devotta, 2004). Sri Lanka is yet to fully grasp and adapt to the idea that it is a multi cultural, religious, ethnic, and lingual state, and there is no bridging process that goes on among these diverse groups. As a result, the role and the work of the CSOs is not properly understood and at times their work would even be disrupted.

The respective governments that have come into power in Sri Lanka during the recent decades have very conveniently made the CSOs, a part of political society. They, for purposes of easy governance rally round and support active and powerful trade unions that are part and parcel of CSOs in Sri Lanka. For example, the Free Workers Union and the National Workers Union are respectively aligned with Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP). This political party alliance of the trade unions has brought about a lack of an independent civil society ethic in Sri Lanka and they can all be considered as either confrontational and cooptation strategies of the state (Devotta, 2004).

Pecuniary benefits have highlighted the “money factor” or the “dollar diplomacy” of the CSOs. Finances and funding on one hand, and the transformation of the CSOs from a voluntary organization to that of service, development and professional oriented institutions on the other have all highlighted the pecuniary benefits of CSOs. This has at times prevented them in achieving their cherished objectives. This is also because, unlike in India, the NGO and the CSO culture are both thought of and put into practice as an institution from the west. This at times has brought about certain negative implications. Wickramasinghe points out that,

Civil society – if one agrees to use this term to describe the social and political space that expresses the desire for emancipation and betterment of communities – does not lend itself to external manufacturing. It cannot be created via blueprints from Washington or London. It is in their attempt to wed theory and practice that

donors have effectively stripped the notion of civil society of any substantive meaning (2005:459).

Having tracing the weaknesses and limitations of CSOs in Sri Lanka, it is also advisable to read the closing comments of what an author has to say with regards to an overemphasizing of the credibility of CSOs in the developing world, and in particular, in South Asia.

However, there are civil society institutions which are also responsive to nationalist, religious and ethnic based fundamentalisms that have very conveniently positioned themselves within the broad definition of civil society institutions. This might require us to come to terms with the threat posed by these movements. They too are watchdogs, but fostering values which are inimical to rights-based organizations. Thus, the real task of the rights-based civil society organizations is to prevent the appropriation of the space created for civil society by ethnic and religious mobilization. This is the greatest of the threats to democracy to all of South Asia (Orjuela, 2004:279).¹⁰

Conclusion

Civil society organizations are a recent manifestation of the non state actors of the modern nation state. They have come to play an important role in society when the state is loosening its cohesion and integrity amidst a global village phenomenon that has come to play a significant role from recent times. The governing process of a state is steadily declining and, instead, to help the process, non state actors have slowly assumed a big responsibility in a governing process that is still at its infancy. Be it whether the state permits it or not, and be it whether these non state actors have performed their tasks positively or not, CSOs have assumed a significant role as a non state actor in the modern world at present. The unraveling story of the CSOs is what we see today and the consequences of its presence is at times very positive while at times it could connote some negative implications. This is determined to a large extent by which and what time and space contexts these CSOs perform their multifarious tasks.

Notes

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- 1 Nira Wickramasinghe terms civil society organizations as the new circles of power. (See Wickramasinghe, 2001: 13)
 - 2 See Wickramasinghe, 2001: 13
 - 3 Comments made by Radhika Coomaraswamy at a Symposium titled *Civil Society in Sri Lanka* held on July 9th 1996 at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
 - 4 A Presentation titled *Five Requirements for Civil Society* made by G.L. Peiris at a Symposium titled *Civil Society in Sri Lanka* held on July 9th 1996 at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
 - 5 A Presentation made by Bradman Weerakoon titled *An Alliance of Insiders and Outsiders* at a Symposium titled *Civil Society in Sri Lanka* held on July 9th 1996 at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka
 - 6 Inherent weaknesses are spoken of later in the paper.
 - 7 There was talk saying that the hands of the only voter in one electoral district who cast his vote were amputated, certainly by the LTTE cadres.
 - 8 A certain amount of empirical research was attempted by the author in the form of field research. Interviews with the heads of the respective organizations and with two academics of the University of Colombo were conducted with regards to the work, its results and their attitudes and opinions of the Presidential elections of November 2005 and the role of the CSOs at the elections. With the basic facts, data, attitudes and opinions towards CSOs, the author has attempted to formulate the role of the political CSOs in Sri Lanka.
 - 9 There was a fourth Centre for Monitoring of Election Violence (CMEV) that also played an important role. Due to time constraints, the author was not able to cover its activities.

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