

Civil Society, Democracy, and Elections

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Free to Demonstrate: Indonesian students burn former President Suharto in effigy. They were protesting the dropping of corruption charges against the former president.

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Strong civil societies empower healthy democracies. By assuring fair elections and then holding the victors to standards of good governance, they cultivate the political conditions within which democracy can thrive.

Recent years have shown that elections alone do not assure democratic rule. Nations that hold fair elections where the winners are accountable to clear standards of good governance share a key advantage:

strong civil society institutions. A study of real and would-be democracies reveals that civil society and democracy are mutually reinforcing.

INDONESIA

Since the overthrow of long-time authoritarian ruler Suharto in 1998, Indonesia has experienced four peaceful electoral transitions — in 1999, 2001, 2004, and 2009. Its democratic gains in that period have been stunning. From a 1997 score of 6 on the Freedom House political and civil liberties scale (with 7 being the worst), the country has joined the ranks of the world's relatively liberal democracies with a score of 2.5 in 2009.

Despite widespread fears of conflict and political ruptures, an active and organized civil society has supplied much of the glue that helps Indonesians adhere

to democratic expectations and norms. Groups such as Democracy Forum, the University Presidents' Forum, and the University Network for Free and Fair Elections ensured fair elections. Just as important, other Indonesian civil society institutions forced politicians to play by the rules, keep their promises, and remain accountable to voters in the periods between elections.

Dr. Hadi Soesastro, executive director of the Jakarta-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, told a U.S. audience in 2001 that the country's new democracy "is still so fragile and, of course, the major risk is that we might see a reversal in the process." Civil society in Indonesia, he declared, "defines its main function as trying to prevent this reversal. It is the number-one priority for us." Nine years later, Indonesian civil society can declare a tentative mission accomplished. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton congratulated civil society leaders in Jakarta in February 2009 for their role in forging a tolerant, democratic, and rights-respecting country. "As I travel around the world over the next years, I will be saying to people, if you want to know whether Islam, democracy, modernity, and women's rights can coexist, go to Indonesia," she said.

It has become widely understood that a healthy democracy requires more than elections. That is why most democracy promotion and assistance focuses instead on other activities — from supporting civil society to strengthening effective legislative processes. But the electoral and non-electoral aspects of democracy are mutually dependent: You cannot have one without the other, and they tend to evolve in tandem. A vibrant civil society, supported by a free press and other independent organizations, not only supports electoral outcomes by ensuring fairness, legitimacy, and compliance, it also supports post-electoral follow-through, in the form of government accountability, transparency, and rule-following. U.S. President Barack Obama, in speeches in Moscow and Accra in 2009, referred to the role of civil society as democratic change from the "bottom up." As he put it in Accra: "This is about more than just holding elections. It's also about what happens between elections."

ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia also reflects these "bottom-up" processes of democratic consolidation. The nation achieved its first truly competitive national election in 2005, helped by Ethiopian civil society organizations previously



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During the 2008 local and parliamentary elections, Ethiopians being trained in how the election process works.

concerned mostly with relief and development efforts. Opposition parties increased their share of the national legislature from 9 to 173 of the 547 seats, the first serious dent in the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) decade-long dominance. During the elections, civil society organizations such as Fafen Development and Vision Ethiopian Congress for Democracy offered civic education training for citizens and deployed election observers.

The regime tried to fudge the election results. Protests and an attempted clampdown in the capital, Addis Ababa, followed. Civil society organizations united in a common front, forcing the regime to accept the true results under a pact reached in May 2006. Civil society leaders who had been arrested were released.

Since then, civil society groups have pressed the EPRDF to respect opposition and to rule by consent rather than coercion. A whole new sense of accountability has emerged. In response to a major concern of advocacy groups, a former prime minister and a former defense minister were charged and convicted on corruption

charges in 2007. Meanwhile, in 2008, the Ethiopian parliament, which, thanks to the efforts of civil society groups, now included members of different political parties and persuasions, adopted a new media law. It prohibits government censorship of private media or the detention of journalists — providing an example of how civil society and competitive elections are mutually reinforcing. As President Obama noted in his Accra speech: “Across Africa, we’ve seen countless examples of people taking control of their destiny, and making change from the bottom up.”

OTHER EXAMPLES

Between 1998 and 2004, five post-communist states — Georgia, Ukraine, Slovakia, Croatia, and Serbia — experienced successful “democratic revolutions.” Civil society played a similar role in each. Again the initial mobilization of civil society was grounded in the desire to uphold fair and clean elections. So-called “free election movements,” which energize civil society and orient it toward a more overtly political function, are seen across the globe as nations struggle to transition to democracy. Recent examples include the Philippines, Ghana, Iran, and Kenya.

AFTER THE ELECTION

After free and fair elections, civil society turns to the less dramatic, less telegenic, but arguably far more important everyday good governance. Civil society engages in a daily struggle to head off repressive laws, expose corruption, and ensure the fair representation of all groups, interests, and ideas. It strives to compel government accountability, and to assure that officeholders continue to play by the rules of the game. As President Obama put it in Cairo in 2009: “You must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy.”

In her award-winning 2005 book *From Elections to Democracy*, Yale University professor Susan Rose-Ackerman considered a number of factors that might ensure policy-making accountability. Only a vibrant civil society, she concluded, held the potential to consolidate democracy. “Creating institutions that channel and

manage public participation by individuals and groups in policy making should be high on the reform agenda of the post-socialist states and of consolidating democracies throughout the world,” she said.

IN THE ABSENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Recent years also have supplied examples where there are elections but no active civil society. Scholars coin phrases like “feckless democracy,” “control democracy,” “illiberal democracy,” and “competitive authoritarianism” to describe countries featuring semi-competitive elections and civil societies too weak or insufficiently developed to assure government accountability. This has been most evident in the post-communist states where democratic revolutions have failed — such as in Belarus (2005) and Kyrgyzstan (2008). Civil society in these countries has been highly donor-dependent, and extends only minimally beyond capital cities. As a result, when civil society activists in these nations have risen up in “free election movements,” no one has followed. Other countries where a shallow or weak civil society has abetted the entrenchment of elected authoritarians include Malaysia, Russia, and Cambodia.

In Venezuela, by contrast, a strong and vibrant civil society has simply not been up to the task of maintaining the vibrant liberal democracy that the country knew in the late 1990s. The Venezuelan case, like that of Zimbabwe, is a reminder that sometimes “bottom-up” forces are insufficient: International pressures, state institutions such as the judiciary and electoral commissions, as well as decisions by key political elites, are all needed to protect democracy. And sometimes, indeed, it is elections alone that can muster sufficient social momentum to win the battle.

Fortunately, political liberalization has its own momentum. Once civil society is unleashed, it is very hard to contain. President Obama and Secretary Clinton rightly emphasize the importance of civil society in strengthening democracy, both during and after elections. Both proudly aim to strengthen U.S. civil society and democracy. President Obama personifies this quest — a community organizer himself, our nation’s leader understands deeply the symbiotic relationship of civil society and effective democracy. ■

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