A Way Forward: What's Civil Society Got To Do With It?

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The role of civil society is not isolated from the role of politics. Politics defines the kind of society each nation cultivates. If we agree that nations around the world see democracy as the most desirable among the different forms of government known to man, then, should the conversation on civil society not revolve around its capacity to promote democratic politics?

There are more questions than answers regarding civil society's role in national development. We have yet to settle on a universal definition. Perhaps the one thing there is absolute agreement on is the fact that whomever belongs to the so-called civil society is, in principle, considered outside the State, military forces, and religious organisations.

Civil Society is a "negative definition" of sorts. We know what it is not, yet we have a hard time explaining what it is. It is constantly changing, dynamic. It is amorphous, oftentimes unstructured, and fluid, unlike political power which demands structure and organisation.

This initial consideration of civil society admits a certain degree of difficulty surrounding its conceptualisation, while inviting us to inquire about its intellectual upbringing.

The core ideas behind civil society are not politically naïve. Although its origins are often associated with Hegel and later with Gramsci, its more recent past reveals a strong connection with the now hegemonic neo-liberal ideology and provides an interesting transition into its relevance for Latin American political life.

Two apparently separate yet intertwined sets of phenomena prove fundamental in understanding civil society. First and foremost, it was bred as part of a western melting pot of modernisation and unwavering neoliberal economic policies driven by the United States throughout the second half of the 20th century. Its vision promoted a society where the State, social justice, and the common good took a back seat to make room for market capitalism, private ownership, and individual well-being.

This neo-liberal recipe resulted in the ousting of the State in matters such as welfare provision and income distribution. Public goods and services were privatised. Basic human rights were transformed into merchandise. Latin American societies found new ways of organising its members. Unions and student associations stopped making

sense and were radicalised by political incumbents. A diminished State was countered by an accelerated emergence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and a consequently larger civil society.

Second and no less important, Latin America and the Caribbean provided a fertile environment for the spread of free market policies. Many of the right-winged totalitarian governments that civil society stood against in fact served as entry points for these economically conservative ideas they would unconsciously promote.

Augusto Pinochet is the classic example. Throughout his dictatorship (1973 – 1990), highly qualified policymakers liberalised and privatised Chile's economy, making profit Chile's sole objective, and consequently exacerbating levels of economic and social inequality.

"In the slightly less than a hundred years from 1898 to 1994, the US government intervened successfully to change governments in Latin America a total of at least 41 times."[1] Twenty-four of those interventions took place during the second half of the 20th century. Unbelievable though it may seem, whether or not the champions of civil society were responsible for the rise to power of most Latin American tyrants did not matter. What mattered was the fact that the anti-political sentiment fostered by years of brutal violence, mass disappearances, and a diminishing quality of life resonated with the fast spreading neo-liberal policies that sought to undermine the State and organise society around the logic of free markets.

Whether it was Pinochet in Chile, Trujillo's perpetuation through Balaguer in the Dominican Republic, Stroessner Matiauda in Paraguay, or Videla in Argentina, the Latin American region suffered endless decades of cruel dictatorships. The idea of a civil(ised) society was thus a natural response to the authoritarian style imposed onto the American south.

While corrupt government administrations (commonly and mistakenly associated with the left) encouraged vertically organised societies, centralised decision-making and high levels of inequality, civil society promoted dialogue, transparency, increased participatory leadership, and more just, horizontal State-society relations.

Perhaps to Latin America's misfortune, civil society's discourse positioned itself as the spearhead of liberal democracy, creating false expectations and giving rise to important contradictions.

Although civil society stood in opposition to authoritarian regimes, it was not and is not a viable solution to the crisis of political representation that continues to haunt the region. What is worse, it tends to reinforce the dangerous Reagan and Thatcherite

1 Coatsworth, J. H. (Spring | Summer 2005). United States Interventions: What for? ReVista Harvard Review of Latin America U.S. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from: https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/united-states-interventions.

sentiment that politics is more a problem than it is a solution, failing to understand that democracy cannot be conceived outside the realm of politics and the State, nor without the work of political parties.

This begs the following questions: Who does civil society represent? Whose interests does it defend?

The answers to these questions are especially relevant to the Dominican Republic's experience, because Dominicans know no other kind of politics. Their political history has been defined by repeated accounts of despotic governments, uninterested in society's well-being.

Civil Society in Dominican Republic and the Marcha Verde Phenomenon

The story of Dominican Republic is one of a never-ending identity crisis. The country was the first American colony of the Spanish empire. This empire was responsible for the massacre of its indigenous population and the destruction of indigenous societal order. Centuries later, the Spanish empire would begin to crumble, and in 1795, after losing a war to France, Spain, the "Mother country", ceded the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo (today the Dominican Republic) to France as a prize of war. During the beginning of the 19th century, Haiti was formed and Spain recovered its colony, only to lose it again to Haitian submission. This was followed by an ephemeral Dominican Independence in 1821 and the official Independence in 1844.

Moving forward, poor political leadership combined with beachhead financial advisors allocated by US business interests and local elect officials led to two US interventions, three decades of a brutal rightist dictatorship (1930-1961) and a culture of institutionalised corruption.

Today, Dominicans begin to question where they are headed. They know they do not wish to continue down the same path, but are unsure of where to go and how to get there. Never having experienced a State capable of providing minimum welfare, civil society has found room to grow in the Dominican Republic.

The civil society Dominicans have come to know comprises mostly NGOs and individual citizens displaced by the State. It is a category for those left over - a category for the indignant. In a poor country with a history of violent, right-winged governments, it is only natural that most civil society organisations focus on issues related to basic rights.

NGOs are private not-for-profit organisations funded by private donations and government moneys. Funding, however, is mostly governmental, making them highly contradictory organisations with limited power.

The country is characterised by its overwhelmingly extractive, rent-seeking elites. Large private organisations argue that donating money is poor business, while the government is highly corrupt[2] and taxes all philanthropic efforts.

NGOs are highly regulated. In 2005, Congress passed Law 122-05,which, upon reflection, Juan Linz may as well have written The Perils of Presidentialism with Dominican Republic in mind. Presidentialism is so real that every NGO must be signed off by the President himself in order to start functioning. While the idea of having a large body of NGOs is nice in principle, they have become a twisted mechanism of State control. The Law empowers NGOs to play a role in public deliberation and increase State accountability, while enticing critical citizens to rely on meager funding and work at the expense of the Executive Power.

While NGOs are recognised by society for their good-hearted intentions, and are seen as spaces that promote trust and the strengthening of social ties, its members tend to unite over a shared distrust in the State. This is an elusive contradiction that harms democracy and requires attention.

Marcha Verde

The most important manifestation of civil society in Dominican history is the Marcha Verde (MV) movement. MV was initiated from December 12, 2016, after a local newspaper first reported on the involvement of Dominican public officials in the Odebrecht corruption scheme.

Odebrecht is a "Brazilian construction company that became an international giant over years of using bribery and corruption to secure around 100 projects in 12 countries, generating ill-gotten gains of about US$3.3 billion."[3] The scandal is of singular importance considering that development of judicial inquiries have led to incriminating testimonies of numerous businessmen, heads of State, and cabinet level public officials.

Unlike prior scandals, Odebrecht is characterised by its regional dynamics. While authoritarian governments oftentimes rule through a tight-knitted control of local actors, no single government has proven capable of entirely controlling foreign entities and public officials. Much like the classic example of the prisoner's dilemma, all of those involved in the corruption scheme benefit from confessing to the crimes committed. When a person responsible for committing a crime thinks he is out of harm's way because he managed to bribe locals for their silence, someone from a foreign country incriminates him. Precisely because someone always benefits from confessing, someone has to take a hit.

2 Transparency International ranked Dominican Republic 120/176 in its 2016 Corruption Perception Index, and fifth to last in the Latin American region, topped only by Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay. Retrieved from: https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016

3 Lopez, L. (2017, May 30). One company has thrown politics in the Western Hemisphere completely off-kilter. Business Insider. Retrieved from: http://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-the-odebrecht-corruption-scandal-2017-5

Access to foreign news has managed to keep the scandal alive and relevant. For the first time in recent political history, the government of Dominican Republic has lost control of the situation. Dominicans have found a way of keeping authorities on their feet. It is because of this that MV has managed to self-organise into a dynamic system of protest structures[4], becoming a real social movement.

By the end of 2017, MV will have planned over 15 marches in different cities around the country. While there is no formal membership, the number of citizens identified with the movement, openly denouncing government corruption and joining the protest marches, is growing. Moreover, citizens who reject political parties, wrongfully considering them inherently corrupt, have expressed interest in MV.

Even with a growing number of supporters, it remains unclear whether the movement is sustainable in the mid to long-term. Although MV becomes a beacon of hope in a country with no political opposition, this civil society movement faces important obstacles.

Unlike most civil society organisations, Marcha Verde has attempted to raise funds among small businessmen and women who have sympathised with the Movement. Nevertheless, Marcha Verde remains a middle class movement in a country with a nearly nonexistent and quickly dwindling middle class. Overall high levels of poverty limit the growth and sustainability of the movement. Though the implications of Odebrecht are regional and therefore transcend Dominican borders, it is a topic of conversation only among middle class members of society.

From afar, Dominican Republic usually seems like a well off place. Influenced by the traditional US optic, it is neither Cuba nor Venezuela, it is a neighbour to a failed State and, no less important, it is considered an upper middle-income country[5]. In spite of this, it remains one of the worst educated countries in the Latin American region. While the implications of white-collar government corruption may seem obvious, this is only true for a small number of people. Most Dominicans can't understand how corruption affects them personally, and this is a problem for both the continued growth of Marcha Verde and the strengthening of democratic structures.

How then do we understand MV? Can it be deemed successful?

MV can be analysed as a conflict between indignant citizens and their government. Citizens take to the streets demanding justice. They organise under the motto Fin a la Impunidad (which stands for Ending Impunity). Ending impunity, however, involves transforming the rules of the game.

4 Fuchs, C. 2006. The Self-Organisation of Social Movements. Systemic Practice and Action Research, Vol. 19, No. 1, February.

5 According to World Bank Data. Retrieved from: https://data.worldbank.org/income-level/upper-middle-income

Can civil society transform them? Is a social movement built to defy traditional political structures? Should Marcha Verde reassess its mid to long-term effectiveness as a social actor? Should it see itself as a complement to political parties?

The solution to the problem of impunity is political. Impunity is intimately related to the crisis of political representation. While a renovation of public leadership proves necessary, political parties do not garner the support of the people and social movements, like MV, are not in the business of winning political power.

One avenue of thought leads to the idea that there is no such thing as "civil society"; the idea that one cannot think of civil society outside of the State, the same way citizen and State are inseparable, perhaps because civil society is a manifestation of citizens united.

The Dominican Republic, like most nations around the world, has changed the lens it uses to understand both local and global political development. Dominicans born early in the 20th century witnessed first hand the horrors of the Trujillo era. Many outlived the civil war of 1965 and the American coup that followed. They understood the idea of politics to be universal. Their sons and daughters, however, embodied a curious mix of the opposing inherited political spirit and the fierce modernity we live and breathe today.

As expected, millennials stand opposite their grandparents. They are the epitome of modernity, perhaps explaining civil society as the evolution of citizens' expressions through time.

Today, Dominican civil society holds the moral high ground and I would be surprised to see anyone, other than the government, question it. Considering Dominicans have never been right-bearers, it is understandable that they think their actions are beyond the State. Are we then witnessing the first steps of a rising modern day democracy?

There is a danger in thinking, like many public intellectuals do, that through civil society, citizens develop their full civic potential. The argument falls apart when considering that a large part of what drives citizens to "unite" "outside of the State" is to build democratic muscle.

The State is unable to guarantee their rights to a decent quality of life, rendering it ineffective. Yet civil society is perhaps more ineffective in that it is usually unable to transcend the logic of social protests. If its objective is to end impunity, it is bound to fail.

It is impossible to solve problems related to democracy outside of the institutional spaces legitimised by society at large. This does not mean that civil society is unimportant, or that it lacks reasons for protest; quite the contrary. Conquering political power, however, which should not be of interest only to political parties, requires more than ethical behavior.

The positions assumed by civil society are a reaction to those taken on by the State. That having been said, one cannot assume that all State forms produce asymmetrical relations and compromise the equality of citizens amongst themselves and before the law. That is a pessimistic view that renders the future worthless. Moreover, generalisations about the failures of the State, without regard to the kinds of State that are being described, are offensive to countries where institutions have fostered impressive levels of sociability, trust, civic engagement, and quality of life.

Historically, many have succumbed to the temptations of power, aiding and abetting crimes committed by the ruling political class. Dictators have always found a way to win over the support of intellectuals and credible voices who send a message of legitimacy to society. As depicted by Vargas Llosa in one of his great novels, The Feast of the Goat:

> "The worst thing that can happen to a Dominican is to be intelligent or competent … Because sooner or later Trujillo will call upon him to serve the regime, or his person, and when he calls, one is not permitted to say no."

However true, that is not enough reason to encapsulate intellectuals in that sort of behaviour. Societies must overcome the feeling of hopelessness.

Civil society may well be travelling down a rocky road of citizenship building. It may well be discovering what it means to belong, albeit the oftentimes contradictory discourse. More importantly, it is without a doubt fighting the culture of fear politics head on.

Is MIT economist Acemoglu right when he proposes civil society as our best bet to restore institutions and democracy?[6]

As per the Dominican experience, civil society plays an important part in defining the issues that citizens care about. More importantly, it helps keep the political system on its feet, questioning the idle nature of political structures and their struggle to connect with the sentiment of ordinary people.

We must be careful not to romanticise the role taken on by civil society. Civil society organisations are contradictory in nature and lack the structure required for strong political action. CSOs cannot replace political parties the same way parties cannot function as civil society organisations do.

For now, they must learn to coexist and bring out the best in each other.

6 Acemoglu, D. (2017, January 18). We are the last defense against Trump. Foreign Policy. Retrieved from: http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/18/we-are-the-last-defense-against-trump-institutions/