

NATION-BUILDING**CONTEXTUALIZING CIVIL SOCIETY:
A KYRGYZSTAN CASE STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

The idea of “civil society” has achieved prominence in political and developmental discourse over the past two decades, particularly in connection with the successive waves of democratization, beginning in Latin America and Eastern Europe and spreading across the developing world. Civil society is an arena where, through free and civilized interaction and communication, individuals obtain and exercise their freedom, as well as pursue their interests. It is a space where people are given an opportunity to enter into social relations free from state interference. The fall of the U.S.S.R. has fundamentally altered the conditions for the emergence of civil society on a global level. The changed political map of Central Asia in general and Kyrgyzstan in particular has made it possible to carry out

democratic reforms and, within this political context, various autonomous social organizations have emerged and begun creating their space in the political system. During the past two decades, open political regimes have been providing a more appropriate context within which civil societies are able to thrive. Such systems have provided a legal and regulatory framework guaranteeing the rights of social groups; they permit the existence of lively media, enabling social organizations to communicate their values and programs; and their political elites are acting in ways that reinforce the acceptance of social diversity and political differences. In this context, the present article is an attempt to shed some light on the different models of civil society emerging in the context of Kyrgyzstan.

KEYWORDS: *civil society, NGOs, liberal civil society, communal civil society, Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, donors.*

Introduction

In the past decade, the concept of civil society has gained considerable attention. The revival of civil society is related to the struggle of the democratic oppositions in Eastern Europe against authoritarian socialist party-states.¹ There are too many reasons to present, however: the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., the good governance initiative of the World Bank under a structural adjustment program, and the triumph of the market economy are the immediate causes that make it a subject of interest.² Since the late 1980s, the concept has been used by multilateral developmental agencies, international financial institutions, nongovernmental organizations, environmentalists, and feminists.³ From a historical perspective, its origin can be traced back to the *societas civilis*⁴ in Aristotelian tradition. The first version of civil society appeared in Aristotle's work *Politics* as *politike koinonia*, or political society/political community. Later on, many Latin translations rendered the Greek *politike koinonia* as *societas civilis*, based on an ethical-political community of free and equal citizens under a legally defined system of law. However, the Aristotelian tradition did not allow for any distinction between the state and society.⁵ For a quite long period of time, it remained one of the central themes in European political thought. For centuries, the concept of civil society has experienced a remarkable career in several languages. Having a long tradition of many centuries, it disappeared during most of the twentieth century before being rediscovered and reinforced in the 1970s and 1980s when the concept became attractive again in the fight against dictatorship, particularly against communist rule in Eastern and Central Europe.⁶

During the 1980s, the term civil society reappeared in the writings of Central and Eastern European dissidents as they tried to come to an understanding of the social process that could stand in opposition to the state.⁷ During this period, many civil social movements, networks, and NGOs emerged and extended their influence beyond national borders. These included the international labor

¹ See: J.L. Cohen, A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, MIT Press, London, p. 16.

² See: *Does Civil Society Matter? Governance in Contemporary India*, ed. by R. Tandon, R. Mohanty, Sage Publication, London, p. 10.

³ See: J. Howell, J. Pearce, *Civil Society and Critical Exploration*, Lynne Rienner, London, 2001, p. 1.

⁴ The word used to describe civil society shifted during the Renaissance, as an important translation of Aristotle appeared and scholars used the term from these translations to refer to the contemporary phenomenon. Cohen and Arato point out that Aristotle's *politike koinonia*, a political community with a unifying ethos, *societas civilis* was also equated with *Respublica* and used to revive republican thought during the period. In this sense, *societas civilis* brought up a dualism that did not make a distinction between the state and society. Instead, it formed an opposition between the crown and the estates of the realm—the nobility, the clergy, and the commons. The era of absolute in Europe put an end to the distribution of power between the sovereignty and the estate of the realm, as monarchs sought to monopolize power. It was then that *societas civilis* could take on the current meaning of “civil society” as opposed to the state (see: *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, ed. by H.K. Anheier, St. Toepler, Vol. 1, Springer, Germany and USA, 2009, p. 350).

⁵ See: J.L. Cohen, A. Arato, op. cit., p. 84.

⁶ See: J.H. Keane, *Civil Society: Berlin Perspectives*, Berghahn Books, 2007, p. 13.

⁷ See: J. Fisher, *Nongovernments: NGOs and Political Development of the Third World*, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2003, p. 11.

movement, campaigns against prostitution and alcoholism, and then—continuing today—the struggle for disarmament and peace. In particular, most recently there have been waves of trans-nationalization and global social movements to transnational advocacy networks.⁸ Civil society has now crossed national borders with unprecedented vehemence and in new political spheres—just think of all the environmental, human rights, and anti-globalization movements. New decentralized forms and new means of communication are available to this end, thus making this possible. A new world view, radically different from any other that has existed before, has been born and is currently enjoying a growth spurt—it is called global civil society.

The collapse of the U.S.S.R. fundamentally, nevertheless, altered the conditions for the development of civil society in Central Asia, as the new conditions emerged with promising prospects for the development of civil society. At that time, civil society's emergence was linked to the empowerment of dissident opposition movements that launched liberal political projects to terminate their region's socialist/communist experiment.⁹ The end of the Cold War is often termed in the way John Keane suggested, i.e. as the spread of a global civil society that has broken the territorial boundaries of nation-states.¹⁰

Throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the creation of new political structures and adoption of new legal frameworks, combined with international assistance to help introduce democratic principles in these new independent states, has offered new opportunities and challenges to the emerging civil society community.¹¹ However, the Central Asian republics lagged behind the rest of the Soviet Union during perestroika in terms of developing civil society. According to Freedom House (2006), Kazakhstan is doing much better than Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, but worse than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.¹² The World Values Survey does not include Kazakhstan in any of the four waves of surveys, but the post-communist Muslim countries that have been surveyed (Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan) score high on secular-rational values (but are more traditional than non-Muslim post-communist countries) and low on self-expression (while scoring high on survival values). The people in these societies may have rather progressive political attitudes, but very few are active members of voluntary organizations.

The fall of the U.S.S.R. has mirrored the aspirations of ordinary men and women to carve out for themselves an autonomous space for collective action and act as a counter to state power.¹³ Over the past two decades, their role in sociopolitical areas has expanded to a larger extent. However, at times, the role of NGOs is being exaggerated to hide authoritarian rule and, at times, being pushed to the background of the law and order problem. This article analyzes the civil society models that have developed over the past two decades in post-independent Kyrgyzstan. The present author argues that both liberal and communal forms, with roots in antiquity but relegated to the background during communist rule, have emerged in post-independent Kyrgyzstan. In the latter case, I give an account of how civil society has developed in the non-Western context and what the efforts of donors to civil society promotion have yielded.

⁸ See: M. Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*, Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003, p. 79.

⁹ See: B. Babajanian, S. Freizer, D. Stevens, "Introduction: Civil Society in Central Asia and the Caucasus," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2005, p. 211.

¹⁰ See: M. Kaldor, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹¹ For example, in 1999, Kyrgyzstan adopted a new Law on Non-Commercial Organizations, which was expected to alter the regulation of NGOs. It replaced a previous law that regulated the registration and on-going activities of NGOs (see: [http://www.osce.org/publications/odihr/2000/10/12360_141_en.pdf]), p. 8.

¹² See: Civil Society Sustainability Report 2006.

¹³ See: *Does Civil Society Matter? Governance in Contemporary India*, p. 9.

Liberal Perspectives

The term *civil society*, *société civile*, *Zivilgesellschaft*, or *Bürgergesellschaft* assumed its modern form in the 17th and 18th centuries, largely through the writers of the Enlightenment. During this stage, various contributions were made by John Locke, Adam Ferguson, Montesquieu and other Encyclopedists, a term used to describe the group of French philosophers who collaborated in the 18th century to produce the *Encyclopedia*, Immanuel Kant, and many others. “Civil society” had a positive connotation during the Enlightenment process. It was largely defined in contrast to the absolutist state. In other words, civil society was by nature something opposite to an absolutist state based on hierarchical feudal order. The Enlightenment also represented profound changes in human consciousness that produced the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789). Absolutism was replaced by republicanism and democracy. The free market and free exchange were the corner stones of the time. The public sphere also emerged in the form of civil society, and the term was usually understood as anything beyond the domination of the state apparatus. In the 18th century, it emerged in the form of merchants associations, skilled craftsmen, and property owners. Immense efforts were made to protect these associations from intrusions by the state. An intellectual debate revolved around the problem of self-interest in commercial society and the resultant social disintegration, but also focused on the argument that capitalist development could foster a new ethical order concerned with the common good.¹⁴ The modern idea of democracy begins with the fusion of civil society and political society by John Locke. Locke referred to it as an association based on the rule of law and formed by men in a state of nature to protect their property, which he saw as consisting of life and liberty as well as “estates.” It is a force that stands in opposition to state power.¹⁵ In the post-Enlightenment age, the likes of Adam Smith, John Locke, Adam Ferguson, and eventually Hegel cast their economic, political and spiritual aspirations in terms of institutional solidarities and liberties.¹⁶ The Scottish Enlightenment reveals it as commercial society (Smith), while Kant identifies it with the properties of public reason. A generation later, Hegel modernized the theory of civil society by bringing it into line with the realities of industrial society separating civil society from the state and family. Civil society is usually taken to mean a realm or space in which there exists a set of organizational actors who are not part of the household, the state, or the market. These organizations form wide-ranging groups, including associations, people, movements, citizen groups, consumer associations, women’s organizations, and groups called NGOs. Tocqueville revealed the democratic habits formed in local associations. He talked about the richness of associational life in the United States and saw this activity as a source of democratic strength and economic power.¹⁷ The different liberal definitions of civil society reflect a debt to classical liberal philosophers and the democratization of civil society in Eastern and Central Europe, and Latin America and, most recently, in the quest for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, Alfred Stepan defines civil society as an “arena where manifold social movements ... and civic organizations from all classes ... attempt to constitute themselves in an ensemble of arrangements so that they can express themselves and advance their interests.”¹⁸

¹⁴ See: J. Giffen, L. Earle with Ch. Buxton, *The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia*, The International NGO Training and Research Center, NGO Management and Policy Series, 2005, p. 6.

¹⁵ See: D. Armstrong, V. Bello, J. Gilson, *Civil Society and International Governance: The Role of Non-State Actors in Global and Regional Regulatory Frameworks*, Vol. 10 of Routledge/Garnet Series: *Europe in the World*, Taylor & Francis, USA, 2011, p. 4.

¹⁶ See: *Civil Society in the Muslim World Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by A.B. Sajoo, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London, 2002, p. 1.

¹⁷ See: D. Lewis, *The Management of Non-Governmental Development Organizations*, Kumarian Press, 2006, p. 29.

¹⁸ A. Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 3.

Michael Walzer, on the other hand, defines civil society as “the space of uncoerced human associations and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest and ideology—that fill this space.”¹⁹ John Keane defines civil society as an aggregate of institutions whose members are engaged primarily in a complex of non-state activities—economic and cultural production, voluntary associations, and household life, and who in this way preserve and transform their identity by exercising all sorts of pressures or controls upon the state institutions.²⁰ In all the above definitions, civil society is separate from the household, the market, and the state. The significance of this midway location is that civil society enjoys autonomy from state control and that membership is voluntary depending on the acceptance or recognition of the interests, wishes, values, ideology, and identity that define a particular group. The motifs of independence from state control and voluntary action are vital to the function of civil society as an agent of social change. As an agent of social change, civil society limits state power and upholds pluralism. The idea of social capital has become influential in relation to development and democracy, which can reduce the destabilizing effect of single-interest religious or ethnic groups within a culturally diverse context. NGOs are organizations that can contribute to its creation and maintenance. Robert Putnam argues that social capital represents the relationship of trust and civic responsibility that are built among the members of a community over a longer period of time. Social capital can therefore be seen in terms of the connections between people that help to facilitate participation in civil society, either through direct or indirect action focused on political change.²¹ Jürgen Habermas has used it in a different context and sought to emancipate it from the instrumental rational of the state and market.²²

Civil Society from a Non-Liberal Perspective

The contemporary discourse on civil society draws upon its various heretical traditions and is not limited to one strand. So, when speaking of civil society, most of the literature makes as much reference to De Tocqueville and Adam Smith as to Hegel and Gramsci, thus making civil society a subject matter of both liberal, as well as leftist political theory. Despite the differences between Hegel, Marx and Gramsci, all three have created a tradition of civil society that was an alternative to the liberal concept of civil society. They rejected the liberal view of civil society as an area of rights and freedoms and believed it to be an artificial and superficial analysis of concept.²³ Marxists, both orthodox and dissidents, used it negatively. They identify it with bourgeoisie society, a realm of contradictions and mystifications sustained by the relation of power.²⁴ Here, civil society is considered to be a bourgeoisie society based on productive capitalism. Marx stressed the negative role of civil society, its atomistic and dehumanizing features, but in so doing, he managed to deepen the analysis of the economic dimensions of the system of needs and went much further than Hegel in

¹⁹ M. Walzer, *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory*, Vail Ballou Press, Binghamton, 2007, p. 115.

²⁰ See: J. Kean, *Democracy and Civil Society*, Verso, London, 1988, p. 14.

²¹ See: D. Lewis, op. cit., pp. 26, 58, 92.

²² See: *Does Civil Society Matter? Governance in Contemporary India*, p. 30.

²³ See: M.M. Abdelrahman, *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt*, I.B. Tauris Academic Studies, London, 2004, p. 20.

²⁴ See: *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. by S. Kaviraj, S. Khilnani, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2001, p. 15.

analyzing the social consequences of capitalist development.²⁵ Marx later impoverished the concept by reducing it to a sphere of bourgeois privacy.²⁶ However, members of the Frankfurt School influenced by Lukac's interpretation of Hegel saw the concept of civil society as a prism through which the contradictions and conflicts of capitalism were refracted. Equally, the rediscovery of Antonio Gramsci's work was a vital spur, while the modification of the arrangements of Marx's schema of base and superstructure gave the concept of civil society, applied to Western Europe, a wholly novel centrality.²⁷ For Hegel, civil society stands for an intermediate realm situated between the state and the household, populated by organized groups or associations that are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in their relations with the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests, values, and identity.²⁸

The change occurred under the influence of capitalism, which was gaining ground, and of early industrialism, the definition of which underwent tremendous changes in the first half of the 19th century in the writings of Hegel, Marx, and others. "Civil society" became even more clearly distinguished from the state than it had been and was understood as a system of needs and work, of the market and particular interests, more in the sense of a "middle-class society" of the bourgeoisie than a "civil society" made up of citizens.

Both the liberal and radical conception of civil society provides different perspectives on the role of NGOs in political processes. The liberal view shows the ways in which NGOs have moved into territories previously occupied by the state apparatus and which found it difficult to adapt to the changing realities of human rights, environment, and gender interests.²⁹ In the radical or Gramscian perspective, it is also possible to use the society theory to understand how NGOs have ultimately institutionalized contested political interests. As far as the state is concerned, the norms of civil society—freedom, publicity, accessibility, and the rule of law, however formal they prove in practice, perform two valuable functions.

- First, these norms give vent to the expression of popular opinion through institutionalization of the right to freedom.
- Second, state power acquires legitimacy through these means.³⁰

On the other hand, by contrast, some scholars have taken a more critical view of INGOs and their relations with national states, international capital, and local NGOs. The argument suggests that some INGOs impede local institutional development, exacerbate information dependency, and further remove the locus of decision-making from the stakeholders in development. These scholars claim that INGOs, along with the United Nations, the World Bank, and multinational corporations, form a global "development industry" more interested in advancing the interests of international capital than in facilitating balanced development.³¹

There have been two main types of donor approaches to working with civil society (NGOs); the first is reforming the system through working on creating an enabling environment by improving the

²⁵ See: J.L. Cohen, A. Arato, op. cit.

²⁶ See: M. Glasius, D. Lewis, H. Seckinelgen, *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts*, 2004, Routledge, USA and Canada, pp. 24-25.

²⁷ See: *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, p. 16.

²⁸ See: J. Manor, M. Robinson, G. White, *Civil Society and Governance: A Concept Paper*, University of Sussex, Institute of Development Studies, 1999, available at [<http://www.ids.ac.uk>].

²⁹ See: A. Lewis, D. Lewis, *The Management of Non-Governmental Development Organizations*, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 63-64.

³⁰ See: *Does Civil Society Matter? Governance in Contemporary India*, p. 31.

³¹ See: Y.W. Bradshaw, M.J. Schafer, "Urbanization and Development: The Emergence of International Nongovernmental Organizations Amid Declining States," *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Spring, 2000, p. 4.

rules of the game under which civil society operates. The second is through support of agendas by working within the existing civil society environment and supporting specific organizations directly. USAID has tended to go the second route as the Cold War strategies and U.S. geopolitical considerations made such agendas typical in the 1980s, when the U.S. often supported military regimes and the apolitical model of development based on technology transfer was prevalent. But more recently, donors have begun focusing on the enabling environment, as well as sectoral agendas.

Finally, there is another emerging discourse in relation to NGOs and civil society—that of the growth of global civil society. Until recently, civil society had been discussed only in relation to the nation-state. However, it is now common to hear it argued that the nation-state is in decline and that global civil society is increasingly representing itself across nation-states through the formation of global institutions, such as formal links between parties, churches, unions, and informal networks among women's movements, peace movements, and global organizations, such as Amnesty International and Green Peace. It indicates the link among international NGOs, national NGOs, and popular organizations. Transformationalists believe that the process of globalization has intensified in modern times, become multifaceted, and is changing global governance, with non-state actors becoming increasingly important.

The idea of “civil society” has achieved prominence in political and developmental discourse over the past two decades, particularly in connection with the successive waves of democratization, beginning in Latin America and Eastern Europe, and spreading across the developing world. In normative terms, civil society has been widely seen as an increasingly crucial agent for limiting authoritarian government, strengthening popular empowerment, reducing the socially atomizing and unsettling effects of market forces, enforcing political accountability, and improving the quality and inclusiveness of governance.³²

Contextualizing the Models of Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan

Given the different strands of thought related to civil society presented above, the author argues that civil society is an arena where, through free and civilized interaction and communication, individuals obtain and exercise their freedoms, as well as pursue their interests. It is a space where people have the opportunity to enter into social relations free from state interference. Conceptualizing civil society from this perspective, the Central Asian countries have not been able to develop a public sphere owing to the nature of the historical clan-based society. Second, authoritarian rule during the Soviet era dominated both private and public sphere.

It is becoming obvious that it is precisely the clan structure of society that is hindering the development of civil society in Central Asia. This is because Kymlicka believes that civil society is the “site of progressive politics through which a culture of inequality can be dismantled.”³³ In many standard definitions, “civil society” is described as existing between or beyond the state, market, and family. The author argues that those who rely entirely on the Western definition of civil society tend to believe that civil society in Central Asia will have to be created from scratch, either because there is nothing of value today upon which to build (the entire Soviet legacy being cast as negative), or because there is no such thing as a traditional society in Central Asia owing to the onslaught of the Soviet system on the previous social structures.³⁴

³² See: J. Manor, M. Robinson, G. White, *op. cit.*

³³ *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, ed. by S. Chambers, W. Kymlicka, Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 8.

³⁴ See: J. Giffen, L. Earle with Ch. Buxton, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

The liberal perspective has put forth some arguments based on the experiences of both the pre-Soviet and the Soviet period. They reason the absence of any sphere that was beyond the control of the Communist party of the time. Authoritarian regimes controlled both the private and the public sphere of individual life.³⁵ This can also be substantiated by the arguments put forward by different experts from time to time. Authoritarianism dominated all spheres of citizen lives and activities, preventing the emergence of a vibrant civil society in the region. The Jadidists, a group of intellectuals, spoke in favor of political, social, and especially religious reform in the Muslim regions. Although they represented a very small group of people, it is important to mention them, particularly in the context of civil society formation in Kyrgyzstan.³⁶

One more important factor is the retraditionalization of Central Asian's political and social life based on intra-familial ties and patron-client relations.³⁷ The institutional legacies of the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods were characterized by the absence of both a civil society and democratic government. The traditional societies can be explained in part by the entrenched system of patron-client relations that kept most of the population in submission and dependent on patron domination. This not only perpetuates kin/local/regional segmentation of society, but also prevents the "creation of clearly delineated criteria of citizenship and legally protected rights."³⁸ Traditionalism, and retraditionalism, has affected the development of civil society in a number of ways.

- First, there is general apathy vis-à-vis civic engagement. An overwhelming majority of people shun the idea of working unpaid in NGOs.
- Second, in such situations, civil society activists often fall short of their professed goals, being plagued by the same ills of traditional society they ostensibly seek to overcome.

It has often been seen that their activist groups are torn between loyalty to the project and loyalty to a kin/clan network.³⁹

Frederic Starr believes that the Central Asian states are not fertile ground for the growth of civil society, and he gives the following reasons for this.

- (1) The traditional hierarchical nature of their cultures, wherein power flows from the top rather than upward from the citizenry.
- (2) The clan-based society, which discourages the establishment of voluntary associations among people that form the core of civil society.
- (3) The Soviet system, which turned the people into subjects rather than free citizens.
- (4) Post-Soviet practices, which have strengthened the hierarchical principle. Voluntary initiatives at the local level are now subject to control by the *mahalla*, as well as to direct regulation by the state.
- (5) The inefficiency of the courts, which do not protect the laws of civil society that exist from violation.⁴⁰

However, these arguments have not precluded the development of civil society in Central Asia any more than feudalism half millennium ago precluded the eventual emergence of civil societies.

³⁵ See: *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. by V. Tismaneanu, M.E. Sharpe, New York, 1995, p. 298.

³⁶ See: *Ibid.*, p. 294.

³⁷ See: S. Cummings, *Oil, Transition and Security in Central Asia*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁹ See: *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁰ See: *Civil Society in Central Asia*, ed. by H. Ruffin, D. Waugh, Center for Civil Society International, University of Washington Press, USA, 1999, pp. 30-31.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, donors became extremely enthusiastic about using civil society in their activities to tackle social, political, and economic problems in the developing countries. Kyrgyzstan received particular support from international organizations. For instance, IMF helped the Kyrgyz state to carry out its economic policies based on shock therapy. Independence made a considerable amount of nonpolitical associational activity possible in the country, while the United States, members of the European Union, and private international donors seek to strengthen the institutions of fragile civil society through programs aimed at training, equipping, and directly financing selected nongovernmental organizations in the region. The emphasis on programs to strengthen civil society has seemed to be a propitious focus of U.S. policy toward Central Asia at this particular time.⁴¹ Leaders of USAID and other governmental funding bodies concluded that the noblest mission their agencies could pursue in the newly independent states is to foster the development of “civil society.” Meanwhile, large donors, such as USAID, DFID, the World Bank, and the United Nations (U.N.) agencies, had programs focusing on promotion of liberal civil society in the early 1990s. A multitude of international organizations, foreign foundations, and NGOs mushroomed in the country to supplement the transformation process Kyrgyzstan is going through.⁴²

Civil society has thus become a slogan for foreign actors wishing to export a political model in order to transform these societies. During our 1996 conference, *NGOs, Civil Society and the State: Building Democracies in Transitional Societies*, some participants argued against the whole concept of civil society as yet another neo-colonial imposition from the major northern development agencies. However, civil society does not lend itself to “external manufacturing.”⁴³ The Civil Code and the Law on Noncommercial Organizations (NCO Law) establish the primary NCO legal framework. As of 22 November, 2011, a total of 16,262 NCOs have been registered, including 4,623 public associations, 3,199 foundations, 5,659 institutions, 690 associations of legal entities, and 2,091 other types.⁴⁴ Democracy promotion and restraining the authoritarian tendencies of the state have been an ultimate goal of the NGOs.⁴⁵ The donor community assumes that civil society is the key factor for promoting both the market economy and liberal democracy.

In this way, we are witnessing the emergence of a liberal model of civil society in the said region. Therefore, the two main approaches for analyzing civil society in Central Asia that have been found to be most relevant in the region can be termed mainstream, or neo-liberal and alternative, and communal, or traditional. Contemporary theoretical literature on civil society also tends to divide civil society groups into “ideal types” to help the observer understand their empirical manifestations in various contexts, and to appreciate the different roles they can play in effecting the change. These “ideal types” suggest ways that civil society has developed as a system of values, political projects, and organizational forms. Many of the contributions herewith have sought to engage with the unfolding debate about the possibility of categorizing models of civil society by testing their applicability in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus (CASC).⁴⁶ The whole concept of liberal civil society is

⁴¹ See: *Civil Society in Central Asia*, p. 5.

⁴² See: B.-M. Petric, “Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan or the Birth of a Globalised Protectorate,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2005, p. 1.

⁴³ A. Garbutt, S. Heap, *Growing Civil Society in Central Asia*, INTRAC, Occasional Papers Series No. 39, 2003, p. 5.

⁴⁴ See: “NGO Law Monitor: Kyrgyz Republic,” available at [<http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/kyrgyz.html>], June 2013, p. 3.

⁴⁵ By 1998, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan laid claim to over 7,000 registered nongovernmental organizations, of which 4,500 were in Kazakhstan, 1,500 in Kyrgyzstan, 800 in Turkmenistan, and 270 in Uzbekistan. However, only 514 NGOs are active at present. This is 6% of the total number of NGOs registered in Central Asia at that time as public associations, public foundations, and associations of legal entities.

⁴⁶ See: J. Giffen, L. Earle with Ch. Buxton, op. cit., p. 7.

based on Robert Putnam's contribution of social capital, which refers to the network of NGOs, associations, clubs, social movements, and so on. These associations generate trust among individuals and contribute to the well-being of society.

Actually the mainstream approach has dominated donor thinking in terms of revealing the goals of the World Bank, such good governance and the market economy, in these newly independent states. The model stands for the notion of networks of free citizens based on professional associations, unions, political parties, and interest groups.⁴⁷ This is often taken as a prerequisite for building democracy and the rule of law.⁴⁸ The liberal conception of civil society is also associated with humanitarian aid and the INGOs present in Kyrgyzstan with international funding to spread the message of human rights, democratic values, and the free media. For this purpose, NGOs have spread and reached the peripheral segments of population. Their aim is to promote local volunteering and capacity-building, moving through organizational development to support newly established NGOs.⁴⁹

These types of NGOs with liberal orientation have made their appearance in the country with dawn of independence. Counterpart International with financial aid from USAID has created country-level networks of civil society support centers with hub centers managing network activities and providing organizational development services to each of the 34 local CSSCs. All 39 offices are providing regular services, such as training, grant management, and community mobilization, to nearly 1,600 NGO clients—twice the level anticipated under this program.⁵⁰ Another NGO active in Kyrgyzstan since 1994, founded by Asiya Sasykbaeva, has built up its organizational capacity with resource centers in Bishkek and Osh, monitoring elections, defending individual rights, etc. Within the liberal notion of civil society, a prominent place goes to human rights, the rule of law, fair elections etc., with a laissez-fair type of state. After 1991, the primacy of the market was trumpeted; it was also clear to the advocates of liberal economies that the market would not function properly in societies where corruption was rife and the rule of law not properly enforced.⁵¹ The donor community assumed that civil society is the key factor for promoting both the market economy and liberal democracy. The absence of institutional infrastructure, such as social arrangements, aims, and aspirations on the part of individuals, is in fact one of the greatest tragedies of and challenges for the new Central Asian states. Whatever evolution occurred during the glasnost period, groups seen as the beginning of civil society were unfortunately written off before they had developed much beyond the earliest stages.⁵² During the early period of independence, the emergence of civil society was linked to the empowerment of dissident opposition movements that launched a liberal political movement to terminate their regions' socialist and communist experiment.

The new NGO law made it possible to significantly reduce the cost of establishing, registering and regulating all NGOs (both locally and regionally within Kyrgyzstan).⁵³ In this respect, this new law potentially strengthens the status of all non-commercial organizations and establishes their clear distinction from commercial organizations. The new NGO law also clearly defines the organizational-legal forms of NGOs (including associations, foundations, and institutions). The effectiveness of the new law will largely depend on its implementation, yet the document itself is one of the most progressive of its kind in the FSU. Of the five republics, only Kyrgyzstan has seen an improvement

⁴⁷ See: J.H. Keane, op. cit., p. 107.

⁴⁸ See: *Civil Society in the Muslim World Contemporary Perspectives*, p. 123.

⁴⁹ See: Ch. Buxton, *The Struggle for Civil Society in Central Asia*, Kumarian Press, USA, 2011, p. 31.

⁵⁰ See: *Counterpart International, The Program of Civil Society and NGO Development for the Central Asian Region*, available at [www.counterpart.org], p. 2.

⁵¹ See: J. Giffen, L. Earle with Ch. Buxton, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵² See: *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, p. 292.

⁵³ [http://www.icnl.org/news/1999/15-Oct.html], 4 July, 2013.

in its overall sustainability score.⁵⁴ As an organizational form, neo-liberal civil society has most often been described as “the realm of autonomous voluntary organizations, acting in the public sphere as an intermediary between the state and private life.” It is best represented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the voluntary sector made up of organizations that are private, non-profit distributing, self-governing, and voluntary.⁵⁵

As of 1989, large-scale Western-driven political projects began to support these groups, grounded in the belief that external funding and training could strengthen nascent neo-liberal civil society. They began to address a wide range of issues, extending from human rights promotion, women’s leadership, election monitoring, environmental protection, education, micro-credit, microeconomic development, and health to family planning. The role of Western funding donors came as a breath of fresh air for them. These organizations provided grants, training, and access to wider networks to support them. However, this has been severely criticized by many analysts as a neo-imperialist project to impose Western hegemony and prevent the recognition of more traditional and indigenous forms of civil society.

From the liberal viewpoint, the state has a limited role, which is reduced to administering justice in society. Meanwhile, civil society is an autonomous, self-regulating actor and acts as a balance to the state. Clearly, donors aimed to create an autonomous civil society, which would function on its own, self-serve itself by providing different services, counterbalance the state, and make it more democratic by representing the voices of different people. In Kyrgyzstan, the main criteria reflecting the presence of a liberal civil society are the number of NGOs active in the country, their legal framework, i.e. registration process, their role in politically sensitive areas, and autonomy from state administration.

Alternative Approach

To claim that civil society is the invention of Western societies means ignoring its historical context. Second, to claim that civil society is “a Western dream” cannot amount to asserting that such a vision was immutably held at any particular historical moment.⁵⁶ Orientalist readings of Muslim history have commonly posited the absence of civil society as a key issue in the failure to engender indigenous democratic institutions.⁵⁷ The emergence of civil society (NGOs) in Central Asia in the 1990s owing to perestroika and glasnost did not happen in a vacuum. The Central Asian societies have long traditions, and the institutions in question took generations to evolve in other societies.⁵⁸

The second form of civil society, which has its roots in antiquity, reappeared with the breakdown of the Soviet Union. However, some observers argue that due to the dominance of the state, no form of civil society existed during Soviet times. In addition to politics and the economy, all aspects of life and society, including religion, education, social relations, art, culture, and history were subjugated to Soviet ideology to serve the purpose of central control. Despite such repression, the *mahalla* existed to serve local purposes, perform religious rites, etc.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ See: *The 2005 NGO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, 11 November, 2012.

⁵⁵ See: B. Babajanian, S. Freizer, D. Stevens, op. cit., p. 211.

⁵⁶ See: *Civil Society in the Muslim World Contemporary Perspectives*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ As Bryan Turner sums up, the argument is that “Islamic society lacked independent cities, an autonomous bourgeoisie, rational bureaucracy, legal reliability, personal property, and the cluster of rights that embody bourgeois culture” (*Civil Society in the Muslim World Contemporary Perspectives*, p. 14).

⁵⁸ See: *Civil Society in Central Asia*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ See: *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, p. 298.

The argument can also be substantiated by a second wave of theorizing about civil society, which begins through the spread of the civil society debate to non-Western contexts in the mid-late 1990s.⁶⁰ Scholars from the Islamic world were frequently at the forefront of this reconceptualization of civil society as a communal concept. Taking the Western conception of civil society into consideration based on free election, free media, and the market economy, civil society has to be created from scratch in Central Asia. This is simple to say, since Central Asian societies contain nothing of any value upon which to build a civil society. Whatever existed during pre-Soviet times has been crushed owing to the onslaught of the Soviet system.⁶¹ Yet a closer look at existing society shows that there is, in fact, immense social potential left over from the era. It is comprised of networks of people-based solidarity groups, extended families, *avlad*, clans, neighborhood clusters, and mahalla.⁶²

The leaders in power after independence played on traditional cultural values, equating tradition with national sentiments, and so on. In 1993, President Karimov issued a decree on mahallas, giving them some powers of social control, i.e. the authority to issue wedding certificates. In any case, traditional patterns of networking, solidarity and clientelism do provide a safety net amidst the growing pauperization of society and the failure of society to meet the people at both ends. The Islamist movements have striven to bypass traditional affiliations by appealing to the sense of communality belonging to Muslims, invoking the religious *umma*, or community that transcends social and ethnic lines. In 1992, in the town of Namangan in Central Asia's Ferghana Valley, a local movement calling itself Adalat took control. And more mosques were built by self-taught mahallas to function as social centers and even NGOs. The effect remains very limited on account of state suppression. But they do contribute to challenging the authoritarian regimes of Kyrgyzstan, although they have failed to achieve any success in building a civil society.⁶³

Here civil society is not viewed as a neo-liberal construct, but as a communal one. Thus, communal civil society is less concerned about state-society relations and the ability of citizens to resist amoral and power-hungry political elites than about relations within society, community solidarity, self-help, and trust.⁶⁴ The main aim of this civil society is to ensure that all members of the group have the necessary means for survival. Based on informal coping mechanisms—family ties, friendship, or good neighborliness—it offers services, community infrastructure, and other essentials. In this context civility signifies providing the basic material and economic conditions for people to ensure that they can function in the group. It is about inspiring “cohesion and trust in local communities.”⁶⁵ Sabine Freizer compares two case studies of civil society organizations operating in two regions of Tajikistan, one “neo-liberal” and one “communal,” and questions whether the two are as different as the theoretical distinction implies. Drawing from a number of case studies in southern Kyrgyzstan, Lucy Earle suggests that an uncritical use of *aksakals* and the *ashar* tradition may be reinforcing rather than challenging exclusionary structures in local communities.⁶⁶

So communal civil society could be defined as a sphere of social interaction where people come together on a voluntary basis, along interest lines, to exchange information, deliberate about collective action, and define public opinion. It is a space made up of organizations, as well as highly informal modes of interaction. Communal civil society could be located in “families, com-

⁶⁰ See: B. Babajanian, S. Freizer, D. Stevens, op. cit., p. 215.

⁶¹ See: *Civil Society in the Muslim World Contemporary Perspectives*, p. 125.

⁶² See: *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁶³ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 133-34.

⁶⁴ See: B. Babajanian, S. Freizer, D. Stevens, op. cit., p. 218.

⁶⁵ M. Glasius, D. Lewis, H. Seckinelgen, op. cit., p. 120.

⁶⁶ See: B. Babajanian, S. Freizer, D. Stevens, op. cit., p. 215.

munities, friendship networks, solidarity workplace ties, voluntarism, and spontaneous groups and movements.”⁶⁷

Various organizational representations of communal civil society have evolved in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus (CASC), often adopting new functions and forms of interaction with the state to change political environments. They include the Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic hordes (*zhuz*), which were based on extended clan networks through which economic, political and social issues were addressed. Amongst urbanized and sedentary populations—especially Tajiks and Uzbeks—kinship ties were strengthened by links based on proximity in mahallas. These were geographic neighborhoods, but also the site of intensive contacts, information exchange, opinion formation, and decision-making. In the post-Soviet period, as several of our authors describe, mahallas have survived in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but often with new occupations and levels of accountability. Throughout Central Asia, traditional forms of community self-help termed *hashar* (in Uzbekistan/Tajikistan) and *ashar* (in Kyrgyzstan) still have empirical meaning today.

It might be possible to see traditional networks as a part of “civil society” in Kyrgyzstan insofar as they reinforce the ties of social solidarity that help people to survive a difficult transition and add to “local sentiments and personal sensitivities” something that the state cannot match.⁶⁸ But, as has been suggested by Rachat Achylova, the logic of such ties tends to run counter to the notions of individual representation and participation generally thought to underlie the notion of a democratic civil society, at least in its Western version.

In newly independent Kyrgyzstan, that framework is spelt out in the constitution, civil code, and various laws applying to specific groups, implemented largely by the Ministry of Justice, and ostensibly given further backing through the courts. The civil code, adopted in two stages in 1996 and 1998, has been described as providing the basis for both a civil and market-oriented society. The reform process has prevented the development of civil society in so far as mass impoverishment has limited the opportunities for participation and generated increased reliance on clientele relations, which might not be overly civil.⁶⁹

* * *

To conclude, civil society, which appeared in Kyrgyzstan in the late 1980s with the emergence of NGOs, needs a strong social base promoted by reinforcement of the already established social fabric rooted in antiquity. Civil society can be strengthened by encouraging the NGOs to play a greater role in providing training and skills.

⁶⁷ A. Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*, University of California Press, 1989, p. 20.

⁶⁸ See: J. Anderson, “Creating a Framework for Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2000, pp. 77-93

⁶⁹ See: *Ibidem*.