

Semi-Civil Society: A Potential Force for the Democratization of Communist Dictatorships?

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Civil Society Separate from the State?

- Many views of society, but most see it as something separate from the state
- Some argue it brought down the communist regimes
- Some that it plays a major role in democratization processes
- Some see it in opposition to the state, some see it as something that supports and improves the state
- But all these views see it as something separate from the state

Civil Society as part of an integrated whole?

- In ancient Greece civil society seen as part of the state (political society)
- Landau (2008): separation between state, civil society and market is only possible analytically if one sees them as integral parts of a unity
- Michael Edwards (2010) views the civil society, state and market as vital parts that are interdependent on each other. He portrays this as an ecosystem, where the interdependency between the parts mean that too much or too little of each part will affect how the other parts work.

Civil Society as a Continuum?

- Uphoff and Krishna (2004) the relationship between civil society and the state “as a continuum and not as a buffer zone.”
- Wischermann (2010: 6) notes, “the boundaries between state and civil society are always blurred and are thus a matter of degree rather than a matter of an either/ or view.”

Our View of Semi-CS

- official Party-state organizations, that become more autonomous from the state as soon as openings in the political opportunity structure arise.
- similar to Linz's (1973) distinction between the "loyal" and "disloyal" opposition, with the semi-opposition comprising the loyal opposition.

Defining Semi CS and its place in the continuum: the extremes

- One extreme: hard-core totalitarian states, like North Korea, where basically no amount of independent activity is permitted and thus, civil society cannot exist at all.
- other extreme we have the ideal-type pluralist democracies that theorists such as Dahl have written about, in which a multitude of interest groups compete for influence and most citizens are active in these organizations and creating the kind of social capital

Semi-CS defined

- Middle of the continuum, where the state has penetrated the organizations somewhat, yet they enjoy some amount of autonomy to make their own decisions and pursue their own interests.
- Sometimes the Party/state creates these organizations, sometimes citizens freely decide to create them, but then need Party or state approval to legally exist.
- Once they exist, they are subject to some amount of control from the Party/state, i.e, through demands that Party members get leadership positions, or by the existence of spies and a secret police that can threaten to suppress the organization and its leaders if it goes "too far."

The Role of CS

- Can help bring down regimes by convincing the leadership that systemic change is necessary (Hungary)
- Can help bring down regimes by cooperating with the opposition (Czechoslovakia)
- Pluralization of society (Vietnam, China)

Semi-civil society in Hungary

- Official intellectuals, working at universities, research centers or in the mass media cooperated with reformists in the regime in pushing for reform.
- Frenzel-Zagórska (1990: 773): Since the mid-1960s Hungarian critical rather than oppositional intellectuals concentrated their endeavours on pressure on the establishment to implement economic reform from above and—in the 1980s—on bringing to power the more radical part of the party's reformist camp.
- Tókes (1996) remarks that the Party's own Institute for Social Sciences as well as universities and research academies wrote radical critiques of the system, which convinced the rulers that they had to change the system and negotiate with the opposition.

Czechoslovakia

- Socialist Youth cooperated with independent students in planning demonstration Nov. 17
- More people came because it was legal.
- Independent students members of SY leadership.
- When demonstrations started, students had access to SY facilities for communication (faxes, phones, photocopying)
- Socialist Party newspaper supported the demonstrations. Havel used their balcony for his speeches to the demonstrators.

Vietnam Unions

- Unions forced to become more autonomous and work for member's interests when dealing with private enterprises
- Problem not Party control as much as that union leaders get their salaries from the enterprises
- Growing number of wildcat strikes pressuring unions to become more supportive of worker interests

Example of Tuition Increases

- Top officials from many organizations opposed increases: Vietnam Education Promotion Association, leaders of universities & research institutes, Farmers' Union, Vice-Chairman of Ho Chi Minh City's Fatherland Front, Vietnam Association for Promoting Education
- On-line newspapers opened discussion forums on the issue.
- 2009: the Vietnam Fatherland Front Central Committee collected 2,446 ideas and suggestions concerning such issues as the tuition increase.
- The government backed down and radically reduced the increase in fees.

Conclusion

- Semi CS can play an important role in bringing down communist regimes or at least in making society much more pluralist
- Semi cs organization take advantage of political openings to increase their autonomy
- This does not mean that the opposition is not important or that semi-CS is the only or even the most important factor in bringing about change, but it is definitely an underestimated and under theorized element in this process.