

Role of Civil Society in Mizoram

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Abstract

It is known among mankind that the legitimacy of law, of the rule, of policy or in short, of Government, is the people who constitute society. Even if totalitarian state claimed to be a legitimate one, the real foundation or source of legitimacy is the collective will of the people as Rousseau claims it; and that collective deliberation must be the deciding agent of the government as a claim by deliberative democrats today. Raising debate among academicians is that civil society in Mizoram wields so much power that it might be able to control the state and government. But the role of civil society is slowly declining mainly because people do not justify most of the actions taken by the civil society groups.

Keywords: civil society, ethnic, legitimacy, repatriation, decline, role

Introduction

John Locke in his 'Two Treaties of Civil Government' argued that the Government was made by a civil life through a contract and that the contract came out from people's consent. Thereby, since the government is the creation of civil society, it is the task of civil society to determine the role of the government – how to rule, how to make laws, whom to punish, whom to reward etc. In short, civil society is prior to government. Since the government is inferior to civil society, any form of government must not violate the natural rights, liberty and property of the people and even representative government cannot violate these rights without the consent of the people. In many

cases, for example, civil society is the basic foundation of modern government. Therefore, the role of civil society not only in India but also in every society is regarded as the most important determiner of good governance.

The working hypothesis in this paper is about the declination of the role of civil society in Mizoram toward good governance. The focus of the paper, however, is to find out to what extent does civil society play a role on governance accountability in Mizoram. As such, it might be necessary to analyze a few historical and political developments of the state with respect to the role of different NGOs and Church organizations. The concept of 'governance' in this paper

includes development in terms of economic, political and social aspects and it would also deal with the concept of peace and security, stability of civil life and administration of government under the process of 'governance'.

It is interesting to note that the concept of civil society differs from country to country, scholars to scholars; and the classical definitions of civil society witnessed a change in modern concept, both in terms of how and who constitutes it. Among them, the popular groups – that differentiate civility and polity is that civil society refers to self-organized associations and social movements that may (or may not) attempt to influence power holders, while political society comprises parties and other contestants for power in political institutions (Elliot, 2003). However, some argue that civil society includes voluntary associations of all types, from football associations and theatre groups to trade unions, churches, caste and panchayats; and irrespective of their goals and objectives, all forms of collectivities are seen as agencies of civil society (Mahajan, 2003). Concerning the role of civil society, there are modern scholars and writers who believe Tocqueville's statement that democratic government is strengthened, not weakened when it faces a vigorous civil society (Putnam R. D., 1993).

The idea of the classical concept is welcomed by many modern thinkers. But it must be remembered here that there are some people who still do not agree with the definition of the classical thinkers; and

yet, there are some writers who differentiate civil society and Church; and some others who include Church within the umbrella of civil society. Accordingly, the role of Church in a democratic society is still a debatable one among the academicians. However, some argue that only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society and only a democratic civil society can sustain a democratic state. The civility that makes democratic politics possible can only be learned in the associational networks; further, the roughly equal and widely dispersed capabilities that sustain the networks have to be fostered by democratic state (Walzer, 2003).

Now, the classical statement is strengthened, when Alexis de Tocqueville argued that American civic associationalism facilitated a strong sense of democratic citizenship (Tocqueville, 1969). It is strongly agreed by many scholars that a society that has a strong civil society may have a tendency to experience higher levels of political representation. In fact, a well-organized society with strong civic associations play a significant role for political socialization and to carve a strong political culture, enabling collective groups to resist unpopular and unjust state policies and apply pressure on state institutions when they find they have erred. This belief was revived and it received strong empirical endorsement when Robert D. Putnam demonstrated the link between civic associationalism and institutional performance (Putnam R. D., 1993).

Some researchers and academicians argue that civil society in Mizoram wield so much power that it might be able to control the state and government. Some think that it is typical of the transitory society (like Mizo society) that the civil society may usurp the power of the state at times to the extent that the society at large will have to bear the brunt (Patnaik, 2008). Moreover, it must be recollected that the general public believe since the 1952 District Council elections about the role of civil society groups, such as the Church and YMA in curbing political and electoral malpractices (house to house campaign, use of expensive poster, covert distribution of money etc.). In fact, the civil society in Mizoram greatly contribute to the efforts to bring good governance in the state (Zarzosanga, 2014). Accordingly, the power of civil society in Mizoram since the District Council era has been a distinct and elegant feature which could have overthrown the authority of the state in the near future. But in reality, or after the attainment of full-fledged statehood on 30th June 1986, the civil society did not usurp the power of the state, nor has it increased its influences over the civil life of the masses. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to find out the reason for the decline of the role of civil society in governance accountability.

Road to Peace in Mizoram

One topic that often needs to be incorporated when talking about Mizoram political development is the insurgency.

The road to peace and tranquillity, the end to militant aggression, and restoration of civic and political stability, all were major issues in the late 1970s. Until today, there are some ongoing debates regarding the hitherto ‘road to peace in Mizoram.’ The debate about peace and governance still exists but this paper attempts to focus on the role played by civil society and to examine how those roles declined after peace and tranquillity were established in the State.

On the eve of political instability in Mizoram, various Church denominations in Mizoram felt the need to step in as peace-makers. Initially, the aim of the Church leaders was to restore goodwill and peaceful atmosphere in Mizoram. As Tocqueville once observed civil society is ‘acting together in the affairs of daily life’ – then the Church took initiative in the affairs of daily life of the Mizo people. Thus, the Presbyterian Church issued a pamphlet condemning the violent activities of the Mizo National Front (MNF) on 12th March 1966. The pamphlet clearly stated that any form of violence is against the teaching of the Gospel as well as the laws of Human Rights (Sangkima, 2006).

Following the efforts that were taken by the Christian Peace Committee (CPC), the politicians, the different Church denominations and the prominent citizens of Aizawl, met at Aijal Club and formed a Peace Advisory Board on 4th October 1974 and its objective was to create a platform for peace negotiations. Young Mizo

Association (YMA) organized a big rally in the different parts of Mizoram in 1974 as a move against the atrocities committed both by the MNF underground and the Security Forces in Mizoram (Zomuanthanga, 2008). After several failed talks were held, Church leaders were still interested in bringing peace and united for that purpose once again in the name of Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitu Committee (MKHC). But despite the efforts taken by the Church and YMA, the effort began to deteriorate after the so-called 'Peace Accord' was signed but it seems that the civil society in Mizoram did not think 'peace' beyond the accord.

Why is Peace important?

One may ask why peace is so important beyond the Peace Accord, are we not enjoying the good life without perfect peace in our society? All these issues need to be resolved because peace is simply prior to the good life. The good life could be sustained within the realm of civil society. The realm of people freely associating and communicating with one another, forming and reforming groups of all sorts, not for the sake of any particular formation – family, tribe, nation, religion, commune, brotherhood or sisterhood, interest group or ideological movement – but for the sake of sociability itself can be termed as good life. Man is by nature a social being (as Locke argued that the civil life/state of nature was pre-political) before we are political or economic beings (Walzer, 2003). If this statement is to be believed, it is necessary for the civil

society to freely act for the benefit of civility; further collective interest should be given more emphasis than individual interest.

The good life as propounded by the Church in Mizoram may have some differences from the above statement. The role of the Church with regard to good life was the concern of 'Synod Social Front' in 1978. Its task was primarily to give teaching and guidelines for Christian involvement in society and politics by means of seminars, booklets, campaign, etc., besides, the Church also plays a vital role in the field of social conduct (Zomuanthanga, 2008). But now, it seems that these kinds of activities are slowly declining because neither the Synod nor any civil society groups organize seminars which are likely to give guidelines for Christian involvement in society and politics; nor issue any relevant booklets or pamphlets; not even a campaign regarding the social life of the people.

Power of Civil Society in Mizoram

When Karl Marx claimed that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' – he then meant the class differentiation as well as a capitalist triumph as a determiner of the social consciousness which is still happening in modern society. But neither the class differentiation nor capitalist hegemony, but the political culture which itself determines the consciousness of the people.

The issue of Chakma settlement in Mizoram; the Bru migration to Tripura in 1997 & 2009 with their repatriation; the unsolved border issue with Assam (Cachar District); these are some of the major issues which are still debated before and during elections. The main NGOs (or civil societies) like YMA and MZP often raise these issues in media. There may come a time when a ruling Party may be forced to take up these issues with the Center (Hluna J. V., 2008). This statement has different senses but it must be noted that it reveals the power of the civil society in Mizoram. But none of these statements or arguments are accomplished yet, so, it seems that the civil society has lost its power.

There is still debate among the academicians as well as among the general public regarding the issue of Chakma and Bru but the role of the civil society on this very topic is hardly acknowledged by the people. This does not mean that the civil society never played any role on this issue; in fact, it was the civil society whose activities socialized the people and taught them ethnonationalism. But these kinds of activities are now a myth for most of the young generation who do not play an active part in any civil society organizations, who do not know either the basic structure of the society as well as of civil life. In other words, the Political culture of the Mizo people are on the brink of destruction and that is why the knowledge about civility is automatically declining.

When it comes to the issue of ethnic relations and tensions in Mizoram, one

will not understand the real issue if one does not appreciate the role of the civil society. In the earlier phases of tension i.e., 1997, between Mizo and Bru; Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP) and Young Mizo Association (YMA) sharply reacted against the demand made by the Bru, especially the MZP in replying to the Bru National Union (BNU) which stated that –

“If the Reangs want to divide or disintegrate Mizoram further, it would be better if they go away. The resolution demanding Autonomous District Council (ADC) can not be accepted by MZP. If the Reang go ahead with their plans, the MZP is ready to fight against such a demand. Mizoram is the only land Mizos have and it could not be lost to foreigners or other communities” (Bhattacharya, 2012).

When the State Government tried to repatriate the Bru refugees in Tripura, it was again the civil society of Mizoram who strongly opposed the actions of the State Government. Almost all the civil society groups made a joint statement condemning the repatriation process of the Government which stated that – *“Refugees should not be taken back unless and until Brus shun violence”* (The Sentinel, 2009). Again, it was the civil society groups known as the Joint Action Committee (JAC) comprising YMA, MUP, MHIP, MZP of western villages who initiated the programme called the *Non-intervention Programme* which was first launched in 2008 in the western belt of Mizoram to avert further tension between Mizo and Bru (Malsawma,

2015). In short, the civil society in Mizoram did what they could to prevent further tension and to build up better relations with another ethnic tribe of Mizoram.

But despite the hard work of civil society groups, the ban for repatriation or the end process of repatriation was merely a failed attempt. In fact, there were a number of Bru people who were repatriated (repatriated by the Government while some were self-repatriated) back to Mamit and Kolasib District of Mizoram; and the civil society did not raise any voice about it. It might be hard to raise voice against every action of the government but the civil society was expected to check those who were self-repatriated which was not done.

Meanwhile, the Government of Mizoram, the Government of Tripura and the Central Government had already made a tripartite talk, on 30th January 2015. In this tripartite talk they agreed to take back all the original settlers to Mizoram. After completion of the 7th phase of repatriation, the two State Governments and the Central Government agreed to close down the repatriation in which those who refused to move back to Mizoram will be deleted from the list of the electoral roll. It was also agreed that those who refused to move back to Mizoram will be allowed to settle permanently in North Tripura and the Central Government will cease the entire package regarding facilitation and rehabilitation process to the Bru, in terms of money or any other sources (The

Mizoram Post, 2015). This decision was then informed to the Supreme Court which was monitoring the process of repatriation and the apex court had already agreed to this agreement and decision (Vanglaini, 2015).

The Central Government urged the State Government to re-initiate another repatriation process after the 7th Batch repatriation failed. It should be recollected that the Central Government and the Government of Tripura decided way back in 2015 to end the repatriation process if the Bru refused to move back to Mizoram. The matter was then reported to the Supreme Court which also agreed on the tripartite talks and decisions, but when the Central Government urged the State Government there was no voice (again) from the civil society groups.

It seemed that the civil society groups strongly opposed the repatriation process since the first batch till 2015 but the civil society welcomed the repatriation after the tripartite talks. As such, they did not raise any voice against the Central Government as well as to the State Government. It seems odd that the civil society groups opposed it and then they welcomed it with a silent voice afterward. This non-involvement or silent voice is nothing but the 'veil of ignorance' (the phrase is borrowed from Rawls' *Justice*) of the civil society leaders. Of course, all leaders of the civil society are not under the veil of ignorance as propounded by Rawls in his *Theory of Justice*; but somehow some leaders are ignorant enough *not* to realize

that the Government of Mizoram, the Government of Tripura and Central Government had tripartite talks in 2015.

The causes of Decline

There may be many reasons but only some of the causes of the decline may be highlighted as given below.

The Political enthusiasm of the Leaders: The first cause for the decline of the role of civil society on governance is that leaders of civil society in Mizoram began to have interest in electoral politics for the future. This means that almost all the civil societies in Mizoram, i.e., MZP, MSU, YMA, MUP, PRISM and even MHIP etc., are drawn towards the political platform. In fact, leaders of those organizations began to involve themselves in electoral politics or state politics which barred them from checking the governance of the state effectively.

It is evident that leaders (all NGOs) of the civil society are now too busy to obtain personal interest from the Government which in turn decrease the efficiency of their role on governance and accountability (Secretary, 2017). It happens even in a well-ordered society that when a civil society covertly compromises with the Government, there is hardly governance accountability in that society because the civil society itself is a part of Government agency. This kind of compromise between the civil society and government will automatically decrease governance accountability as one writer observed "Once it (civil society) takes the

side of the Government, the freedom and security of the people will be in jeopardy. And that creates the worst scenario for democracy. It does not mean that civil society should always contest or oppose the government" (Satapathy, 2008).

Anyhow, the input function in a political system is more important in developing societies (like Mizoram) as claimed by Almond and Coleman and that the role of civil society as an input mechanism would likely be less effective if the leaders of civil society groups always try to obtain personal interest from the Government.

Ignorant of the Leaders: To what extent are the leaders of the civil society ignorant is another question. It should be assumed that no leader knows his place, his skill and his class condition in the technologically driven society. The leader of the civil society neither knows whether there is a flow of information bypassed between editors of his local newspaper or bulletin; nor does he know the very news that is being bypassed under his supervision (Vanneihtluanga, 2017). Now, this ignorance might be one of the factors which leads to the decline of the role of civil society on governance issue. Some may argue that the process of globalization and interconnectedness facilitates the modern lifestyle by innovative technology and if the leaders of any organization do not understand or do not have the skill to make use of that innovation, it will be a burden for him as well as for the organization. In other words, the process of globalization is

being harnessed both in positive and negative ways in which there is a positive impact on the younger generation, and a negative impact on those who dare to lead the civil society; hence, problem lies here that these leaders do not even realize that they are being negatively impacted by the process of globalization.

Self-realization: Members, as well as leaders of the civil society now realize that some political and social change is necessary for society. For instances, the launching of Shopping Mall (Vishal Mega Mart) in 2017 which the MZP opposed but failed. And the YMA did not raise any voice against it; the revoking of the Mizoram Liquor Total Prohibition (MLTP) Act and the passing of the Mizoram Liquor Prohibition and Control (MLPC) in 2014 were not opposed by any civil society groups except by the Church. Further, shifting of elementary and higher education school timing was sharply opposed by the Mizo Student Union (MSU) but it is still not revoked by the State Government. All the reaction against these issues were a total failure. Therefore, *why not react more to it?* is another important question. The civil society groups realize that the need to change society may be not by raising any more loud voices against these pressing issues.

Abnegation of the Just Order of Nature: According to Plato – Justice of the state exists when all citizens occupy their respective position and perform their duties and tasks, not meddling with the

affairs of others (Rao, 1986). Plato may be right or wrong. It might be safe to say that the civil society in Mizoram plays too much role beyond their jurisdictions. Thereby, when the just order of nature is overridden by the civil society, it is likely that their role might not be effective as it was once before. One person told that the Central YMA has tried to exercise the executive power of the state which is the task of the Government; when failing to do so effectively (it is likely to fail by Plato's concept of Justice), there is no alternative but to decrease their role on any governance issue. If the leaders of civil society groups concern themselves only with the policy of the Government, they might realize that it will be better if they do not interfere in the executive work of the Government, which in turn will increase the role and power of the civil society.

There are some civil society groups who have been allegedly collecting illegitimate taxes from the non-Mizo businessman; there are some other groups who adopt violent means to achieve their annual objective to put an end to the drug problem in which some people lost their lives on the grounds of mere suspicion (Hmar, 2014). Such is the condition of the civil society in Mizoram which has slowly lost its general acceptance among the people. In this way, there is abnegation of the *Just Order of Nature*; the general masses simply cannot justify this kind of arbitrary activities which sometimes lead to the violation of the law of basic human rights.

Moreover, there are some political actors who have secretly used the power of civil society not for the public good, but for the good of one ethnic tribe or personal interest only, which in turn create a feeling of hesitation to the present leaders of the civil society groups to act freely and effectively on good governance. In other words, the present leaders of civil society groups are reluctant to play an active part on all relevant issues because they fear that the general masses might not justify all of their actions just as the masses did not justify some of their roles in the 2000s.

When failing to do their active role in governance accountability, one may ask *why civil society groups are still important. Can we not live without civil society?* The production and reproduction of loyalty, civility, political competence, and trust in authority are never the work of the state alone as claimed by totalitarianism (Walzer, 2003). Whether we like it or not civil life determine our behaviour and it is the main task of civil society to socialize the people. In short, civil society plays a vital role in the socialisation of the people not only in Mizo society but also in every society of the world.

Conclusion

The role of civil society is important in almost every society, particularly in a democratic society. It may or may not play a vital role on governance issue in totalitarian society in which the power of the state overthrows any other power within its jurisdiction, yet, the role is still significant. The power of civil society may increase or decrease due to the acceptance of the general masses which give legitimacy to every power within the society. As already stated above the power of civil society groups in Mizoram began to decrease or deteriorate mainly because the people do not justify most of the actions taken by the civil society groups. There is an abnegation of the just order of nature, ignorant and political will of the leaders, and lastly self-realization among the members of the civil society groups. The only civil society groups which has not yet lost its power and not yet declined in Mizoram is the Mizoram People Forum (MPF) comprising of almost all the civil society groups and the churches. The role of civil society groups are now critically commented upon and observed in Mizoram due to increase in awareness level of the people, and objective observations automatically lead the civil societies to reform themselves.

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