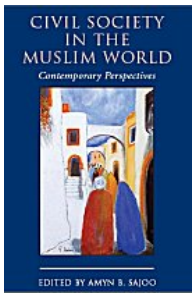
The Institute of Ismaili Studies



Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives

Edited by Amyn B. Sajoo

London & New York: I.B. Tauris in association with
The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2002.
339 pp. ISBN 1 86064 858 4 (HB)

A Reading Guide by Fayaz S. Alibhai*

Introduction

What is civil society? And why has it become a buzzword in our times? The phrase did not gain currency only after the events of September 11, 2001. Rather, from the mid-1980s, that is to say even far prior to those events, discussions and debates on the subject of civil society – imagined and practised in different ways – were well underway amongst citizens and communities across the Muslim world. With recent events in the Middle East, subsequent talk of the reconstruction of Iraq, be it in its physical, social, or economic infrastructure, continual analysis of whether the country and its people can rise effectively to the challenges of democracy, and so on, the notion of civil society has acquired even more salience and relevance than before. Against the backdrop of this pursuit for accountable governance and participatory politics, concerns about human rights, pluralism, and gender equity have taken centre stage in countries ranging from Indonesia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Iran, to Turkey, Egypt and the countries of the Maghreb.

* Education Officer, IIS-ITREB Liaison Department, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, March 2003 (revised May 2003). My sincere thanks go to Dr. Karim Janmohamed and Mr. Kutub Kassam for reviewing earlier drafts of this guide. Any errors that remain are, of course, mine alone.

These are civic concerns, concerns that relate to individuals as members of society wherever they may live. And they are particularly urgent for Muslim societies because political violence and some of its counter responses threaten to sap the ethical legacy of Muslim civilisations. They also jeopardise the role that this legacy can play in the wider development of a culture of citizenship in which both the rule of law and individual dignity are respected.

Lest there arises a tendency amongst some to dismiss such concerns as being 'too abstract', 'very distant' or 'not really relevant', we would do well to remember that our understanding of, and engagement with, these issues influence our intellectual, social and practical responses to worries that are closer to home. Wherever in the world our 'home' may be, tolerance, pluralism, freedom of speech, and equality between sexes are but a few of the motifs repeated almost daily across newspaper headlines, radio debates and television talk-shows.

Quick Review

1. What are civic concerns?
2. How is 'Civil Society' broadly understood?

Civil Society is broadly understood in two ways. There are those who hold that it is a Western, secular idea, one that is irrelevant to contexts in which religion and tradition interplay with everyday life. There are also those who contend that civil society and key Islamic values have not been and are not incompatible; rather, where there is a search for a modern and democratic citizenship there exist the sparks that can further renew and enrich it.

With a few exceptions, most of the chapters in *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives* evolved from papers delivered at a series of seminars under the rubric 'Civil Society in Comparative Muslim Contexts', hosted by The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London from November 2000 to October 2001.

The book, edited by Amyn B. Sajoo, challenges both popular and scholarly notions about the Muslim world today.

With contributions by some of the most eminent scholars in the field, including Shirin Akiner (SOAS, University of London), Mohammed Arkoun (the Sorbonne), Aziz Esmail (The Institute of Ismaili Studies), Tair Faradov (International Centre for Social Research), Abdou Filali-Ansary (Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations), Ersin Kalaycioğlu (Sabanci University), Iftikhar Malik (Bath Spa University College), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (New York University), Olivier Roy (Centre National pour Recherche Scientifique) and Amyn B. Sajoo (The Institute of Ismaili Studies), the book will appeal to anyone interested in present-day culture, politics and religion, and in the challenges of modernity as they relate to citizenship.

Structure and Content of the Book

In his *Foreword* to the book, Azim Nanji (The Institute of Ismaili Studies) summarises the approach taken by the above authors as an attempt in avoiding a monolithic presentation of both Islam and its impact on Muslim societies. This is in contrast to the tendency in both the popular media and some academic writings to ignore the diversity of Muslim societies and paint instead a highly simplistic picture of Islam. He asserts that some aspects of Muslim society are wrongly "thought to be inhospitable to the building of civic cultures" (p. xi), with a reminder that expressions of extremism in religious traditions are historical tendencies not limited just to Muslims. Rather,

> there is abundant evidence of Muslim teaching, thought and experience that has enabled moral guidance and the building of institutions in support of the good society (p. xi).

This sensibility runs deep and across the history of most Muslim civilisations. In this tapestry, ethical tenets are expressed as legal obligations and as personal and social commitments in cultural as well as intellectual life. Nanji goes on to observe that there is an argument that ethics deal with values and, as such, anyone thinking about what is right and wrong or good and bad is, in fact, ethically engaged. When these values are collective or become shared, they provide the best basis for civil society when they are also

…anyone thinking about what is right and wrong or good and bad is, in fact, ethically engaged…

"sustained by education, embedded in strong public and civic institutions, [and] within a pluralistic framework" (p. xii). He ends by posing the question:

> Can Muslim societies build on the inherited framework of ethical and community commitment and reconcile these values with models of governance that share the common search for a moral order for themselves and others among whom they live? (p. xii).

In other words, can Muslims integrate their tradition of commitment to ethics and the community with *other* systems of governance that also seek to distinguish between right and wrong so as to benefit both themselves as well as others in a shared, living context?

In the first chapter of the book entitled *Introduction: Civic Quests and Bequests*, Amyn B. Sajoo briefly describes how the language and vocabulary of civil society is used by academics, human rights and development activists, artists, intellectuals, governments and international financial and political agencies. He states that the way in which it is used

> ranges from straightforward descriptions of non-state institutions and associations that are regarded as critical to sustaining modern democratic participation, to the analytical expression of values – individual liberty, public solidarity, pluralism, non-violence – that sustain a dynamic civic culture (p. 4).

Quick Review
What are some of the main arguments and counter-arguments that have been put forward about the disjointedness of civil society in Muslim contexts?

Sajoo begins by summarising some of the arguments that have been put forward about the incompatibility of civil society in Muslim contexts. The Turkish scholar Şerif Mardin, for example, argues that while civility is an idea shared by different civilisations, civil society – which gives primacy to "the rule of law, human agency and the autonomy of society and individuals from the state" (p. 2) – is not. "Civil society," Mardin says, "is a Western dream, a historical aspiration" (p. 1). In these terms it can be traced to mediaeval Europe, but in its more concrete expression, Mardin, like most others, situates civil society in the post-Enlightenment age where its economic, political and spiritual aspirations are seen "in terms of *institutionalised* solidarities and liberties" (p. 1).

Juxtaposed with the idea that Muslims are said to yearn for 'social equilibrium created under the aegis of a just prince' (p. 2), it is but a little step to put forward the idea that in Muslim societies, the charismatic authority of the ruler prevails over the significance of the rule of law.

It is also argued that although Muslim societies in the present context may acquire aspects of Western modernity (such as the political and economic institutions of democracy), this does not detract from the fact that Muslim dreams and aspirations remain different from Western dreams and aspirations as a consequence of their different legacies, be it an 'Islamic collective memory' or a 'post-industrialist society'. Effective citizenship, and hence civil society, is based on individual freedom. To this end, it is also asserted that this freedom in Muslim societies, if not practically elusive, is in principle unsought.

If it is indeed the case that civil society is a concept tied to the specific historical development of North Atlantic and West European society, "why," Sajoo asks,

> the readiness to acknowledge the prospect of Czech, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak ... Argentine, Brazilian, Chilean, Mexican ... Chinese, Phillipine, South Korean and Vietnamese dreams of institutionalising the legal, economic and political frameworks of civic culture? (p. 3).

He goes on to ask if their collective memories are not as unique as those of the West or why they do

> not content themselves with a commitment to civility in public life, drawing on Buddhist, Catholic, Confucian, Orthodox Christian and other civilisational bequests? (p. 3).

Moreover, he even wonders whether indeed these legacies thought of individual freedom in the way Protestant traditions of Northern Europe did, "and if not, how could they dream of modern citizenship and its attendant cluster of political liberties?" (p. 3).

Sajoo takes issue with claims that the uniqueness of the collective memory of Islam or that of the Middle East makes Muslim values "inherently incompatible with, if not actively inimical to, modern

In terms of faith, history, and socio-economics, it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify references to Islam in monolithic terms

civil society", arguing that these claims are "grounded in dubious assumptions" (p. 7) both empirically and conceptually. In editing this book, he aims "to spell out both the scale and quality of the plural realities" (p. 8) of Muslim societies, taking examples from the newly emerged republics of ex-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. He also notes that in Western Europe and North America today, the Muslim diaspora

> has demographic and intellectual roots that affect the evolving nature of citizenship and civil society within those countries, even as they impact emerging discourses in their ancestral lands (p. 8).

These issues are certainly not limited to Islam or to Muslims. But as Sajoo illustrates, what we learn from these concerns is that it becomes increasingly difficult to justify references to Islam in monolithic terms whether it is in terms of faith, history or socio-economic condition.

This diversity within Islam has often been underlined by His Highness the Aga Khan. Indeed, in an interview with the *Pakistan and Gulf Economist* to mark the occasion of the Silver Jubilee in March 1983, His Highness the Aga Khan said in part

> ...there is great diversity within the Muslim populations of the world; they are from different ethnic backgrounds, different languages, different cultural heritage, and so long as all segments of the Islamic world are healthy, lively and creative, that diversity is a source of strength and not weakness.

> …academic enquiry needs to map democratic values, power, wealth and liberty across societies and systems of government if it is to contribute in some way to breaking down barriers of ideology between the developed and the developing world…

The purpose of the book, says Sajoo, is not to depict "the full spectrum of civic life in the Muslim public sphere – or rather spheres" (p. 18) but to address some of the intellectual and practical issues that impact upon the prospects of civil society in communities and societies in the Muslim world and beyond. Within a wider context of ideas of law, reason and justice, the legacies of Muslim scripture, thought and practice have great potential as "resources rich in their expressions of social solidarity, pluralism and ethics" (p. 18).

In the next article, *Locating Civil Society in Islamic Contexts*, Mohammed Arkoun observes that

> Civil society is one of those modern concepts that is constantly debated in contemporary societies along with democracy, the rule of law, human rights, citizenship, justice and the free market (p. 35).

He cautions against taking specific aspects of Western civic culture and applying them as standards for transitional societies of Muslims. To do so would be to de-link these concepts, "cut [them] off from their existential, cultural, historical and intellectual contexts of emergence, genesis and metamorphosis" (p. 35). This is particularly the case if the actual process of thinking about these concepts has no roots, or does not begin, in "the historical experience that shapes the collective memory of each social group" (p. 35). He also warns against the reverse tendency – that of selecting aspects of Western society and projecting them onto an Islamic past based on a mythical reading of history. He argues that limiting analysis to simply the structure of national and international power only maintains the barriers of ideology between the developed and the developing world.

Consequently, academic enquiry must engage

> in the process of mapping democratic values, power, wealth and the emancipation of the human condition in assorted regimes and societies, including those that are obscurantist and disabling (p. 36-7).

For Arkoun, then, stepping out of frames of thinking that hinder multiple paths of discovery and the construction of individual 'truths', is a fundamental requirement of civil society. The best way to do this lies "in a new posture of reason, a more enabled imagination, an enlarged collective encompassing memory – a global civil society" (p. 59).

Aziz Esmail in *Self, Society, Civility and Islam*, the title of the following chapter in the book, continues in the vein of locating the pursuit of civic life in Muslim dealings with modernity. His essay aims first to evaluate the idea of the self, an idea "which forms the background, and pervades the assumptions, of modern, liberal democratic societies" (p. 63). His

It is not enough to expect a liberal ethic to emerge automatically as a result of different communities nurturing their own particular traditions

second aim, having noted the importance of these ideas in the development of "a liberal, civic order in the Muslim context" (p. 63), is to illustrate how they are related to other relevant ideas of Islam.

Esmail argues that to expect a civil society which is uniquely Islamic is as unwise as neglecting the importance of the context of Islam in building and thinking about civil society. The values of diversity, pluralism, freedom, openness, etc., emerged from historical traditions. To expect a liberal ethic to emerge automatically as a result of different communities nurturing their own particular traditions is not enough. As he puts it, this "liberal sentiment has to grow *within* particular historical identities" (p. 74) and although it must go beyond the specific identities, it must not weaken them.

In other words, as articulated by His Highness the Aga Khan in the interview mentioned earlier,

> those people who practise the faith of Islam throughout the world must be supported within their own context i.e. their own social, economic, demographic and ethnic background. This is what, to me, would make the future of the Muslim people strong.

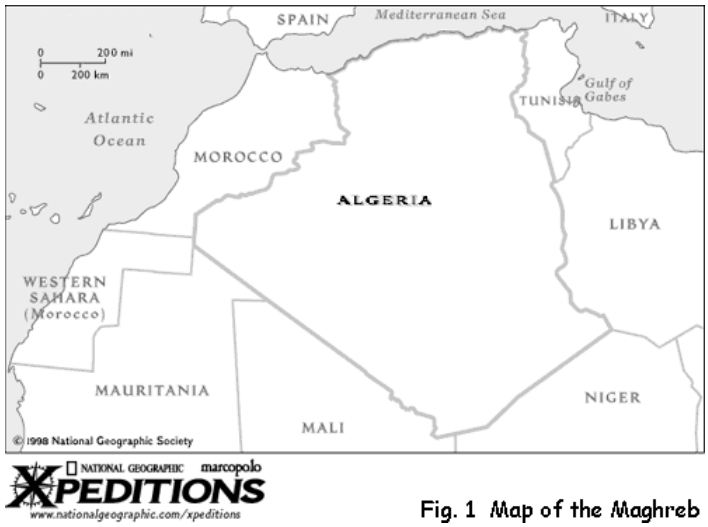


Fig. 1 Map of the Maghreb

In a later chapter on the Maghreb entitled *State, Society and Creed*, Abdou Filali-Ansary outlines some very specific civic developments. The Maghreb includes the countries of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia (Fig. 1). Civic life in the West is focused on limiting state power. In the Maghreb, because of the weakness of the state, it is by default concentrated on filling in a gap of regulating social activities, and the provision of vital social services. He states that "the historical experience of the Maghreb can shed useful light ... on the prospects for civil society within, and perhaps beyond, the region" (p. 296). It may also help to challenge scholarship that assumes 'Islam' to be a monolithic bloc to be compared with

another, opposing concept, evident in questions such as: 'Is Islam compatible with modernity?', and 'Could Islam accommodate democracy?' In addition, this historical experience may go some way toward questioning "some of the prevailing usages of civil society and clarify[ing] our understandings" (p. 297), as Filali-Ansary himself does.

> Quick Review
> How does the women's press in Iran serve as a marker of the growth or decline of civil society in the country?

We move on now, from the Maghreb to Iran (Fig. 2). In *Debating Women: Gender and the Public Sphere in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, Ziba Mir-Hosseini illustrates how the press, in an environment where democratic choice is limited, substitutes for political parties. The fortunes of the women's press, particularly, is an important measure of the degree of civil society, for it is not only one of

> the ways in which women have used the emergent public sphere in the Islamic Republic to debate and negotiate their rights in law and society,

but it also demonstrates "the potential of political reforms in creating a democratic society within the context of an Islamic Republic" (p. 96). Indeed, women critiquing the law in Iran do so in a vocabulary that speaks of the ethics of fairness and equality in terms grounded in the *sharia*.

The *sharia*, where it operates, has tended to dominate public life even though social ethics have played an important and enduring role among Muslims. As Amyn Sajoo observes in his second essay, on *Ethics in the Civitas*, contemporary liberalism divorces ethical tenets from civic ones despite the fact that civil society was once seen as "the ethical edifice of human relations" (p. 214). When this liberalism is applied to Muslim contexts, civil society is perceived to face severe historical, ideological and religious obstacles. This is parti-

Fig. 2 Map of Iran

cularly because the spheres of the secular (*dunya*), the sacred (*din*) and the state (*dawla*) are thought to be merged, and because of the notion held of the *umma* as a transcendent community.

Liberal discourse on civil society sees this as problematic because it is itself based "on the existence of a pluralist and secular public sphere in which the individual freely associates with others outside the control of the state" (p. 214-5). Sajoo argues that there exists "the need to separate the institutions of state, religion and society, as a shared modern democratic and ethical imperative" (p. 226) for this would practically enable and enrich the civic spirit of Islam. He cautions that an exercise in locating civic life in ethics is not a substitute for the rule of law. Nevertheless, there are both strategic and moral reasons for situating it so, not the least of which has a bearing on the issue of political violence, for where the state or the rule of law is weak, it falls upon ethics to maintain order.

This brings us to the chapter on *Prospects for Civil Society in Tajikistan* by Shirin Akiner. Tajikistan (Fig. 3) has "for over a century ... experienced incessant upheaval and trauma" (p. 150). Recovery from the brutal civil war (1992-1994) in which it was plunged after independence is only now underway. Akiner's approach is

> concerned with an examination of the situation as it is, not with value judgements as to what it ought to be, still less with recommendations as to how to achieve particular goals (p. 150).

She begins by providing a brief historical background to the Tajik nation and the Tajik state, going on to survey the process of its modernization, Islamic revival and secular politicisation, down to the outbreak of civil war. She then examines some aspects of post-conflict Tajikistan and the nature of existing voluntary and informal

Fig. 3 Map of Tajikistan

associations before highlighting the case of Gorno-Badakhshan, an eastern, autonomous region of Tajikistan where, among other aid and development programmes in Tajikistan, the activities of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) have "expanded into an integrated programme of economic, social, educational and cultural development" (p. 178).

Quick Review
According to Olivier Roy, what are the three notions of civil society applied in the context of Central Asia?

She acknowledges the positive aspects of the programme noting, however, that "it is important to temper optimism with an awareness that several projects are still at an early stage of implementation" (p. 181), and as yet, geographically specific. On the whole, she is modestly optimistic about "post-conflict progress towards reconstruction and development in Tajikistan" (p. 186), ending with the statement that "the outlook is more hopeful today than at any time in the past decade" (p. 198).

In a related article entitled *Soviet Legacies and Western Aid Imperatives in the New Central Asia*, Olivier Roy observes that there are three notions of civil society applied within the Central Asian setting. Each of these takes into account general definitions as well as specific aspects of post-Soviet conditions.

The first of these is the idea of

> networks of free citizens – professional associations, unions, political parties, public interest groups – that create political space as a prerequisite for building democracy and the rule of law (p. 123).

This position, exemplified by humanitarian or aid workers and international organisations and their subsidiaries active in the region, casts democracy, human rights and the rule of law as universal concepts, brought about by "free citizens who are not bound by any corporate or collective links, and enter freely into associations to work for the common good" (p. 124). All too often, however, this approach is seen by local people as a model that is not only both abstract and idealised, but also the product of Western historical processes that took place over centuries before taking their present form, and which

are now being forcibly implemented over a single generation.

The second notion deals with traditional networks of solidarity that enable people to either stand up to the state or to fill in gaps left by its weakness or corruption. The issue here, to put it plainly, "is to determine the extent to which there is a 'traditional society' in Central Asia" (p. 124).

The third notion proposes a 'religious civil society' "in which a community of believers undertake to live according to the values and ethics of their faith (in this case, Islam)" (p. 124). Such a framework, it is asserted, would not only allow the retention of an authentic identity and legitimacy, but would also be able to withstand Western influences. Roy argues that it is really the second notion, the home-grown networks of solidarity, which will pave the path to the development of a modern civil society.

Indeed, as alluded to by His Highness the Aga Khan in the magazine interview mentioned earlier, Roy, too, asserts that

> Building civil society is going to be a more meaningful exercise if it is predicated on the social fabric as it exists and is evolving, rather than on abstract perceptual models derived from elsewhere of what civic culture ought to be (p. 144).

This principle is evident in Tair Faradov's contribution entitled *Religiosity and Civic Culture in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: A Sociological Perspective.* His key objective was to identify different types of religiosity that relate to civic life in Azerbaijan (Fig. 4) today. Underlying and informing Faradov's survey are the following questions:

> What are the principal tendencies and peculiarities in the development of religious processes in post-Soviet Azerbaijan? What specific factors condition the trend in growing religiosity among citizens? How does religion influence the tenor of public and individual life? Is public opinion inclined more toward secular or religious preferences in terms of social organisation? Are there conditioning factors that may lead to the politicisation of Islam in the future? (p. 194).

Fig. 4 Map of Azerbaijan

His findings indicate that since

independence from the Soviet Union, religiosity is on the rise in Azerbaijani society. For most ordinary Azeris,

> religious affinities appear to imply a commitment to norms and customs that guide daily behaviour, and provide a benchmark for social and personal judgements. Religiosity in the more traditional sense of adherence to rituals and rules, much less active membership in religious organisations, is noticeably weak" (p. 211).

Fig. 5 Map of Turkey

Faradov argues that this is partly because of the lack of educational material available. In any case, an individual in Azerbaijani society

> can both express personal identity – most commonly, but certainly not exclusively, as a Muslim – and also engage in a variety of communal activities with an overtly religious purpose (like mosque-building) (p. 211),

a phenomenon whose civic implication clearly includes an expanding space for the expression of one's identity.

On the whole, it appears that religion in Azerbaijan is largely and equally considered to be an ethical and socio-cultural commitment as well as a spiritual one. Consequently, Islam can be seen as linked to nationalism and also pluralism, tolerance and civic engagement, a phenomenon that has parallels with state attempts elsewhere in Central Asia, which are, however, less successful in this regard.

Azerbaijani support for state regulation of religious activism appears to be strong vis-à-vis the protection of national security and the appropriation of Islam to reflect the "modern ethos of civil society" (p. 212), even as many citizens remain concerned about the present government's authoritarian tendencies.

This kind of receptivity to Westernization may be seen as a progressive leaning towards a secularized Islam. In Turkey (Fig. 5), often held up as just such an example, civil society has, as Ersin Kalaycioğlu notes in *State and Civil Society in Turkey*, "gone through phases of severe relapse and

rapid rebound" (p. 249). Kalaycioğlu aims to evaluate

> state-civil society relations in a cultural environment shaped by a rift between centre and periphery, and a socio-political environment of rapid change, volatility and turbulence (p. 249).

Turkey has undergone waves of democratisation since World War II and Kalaycioğlu's analysis illustrates that associational life, the heart of civil society, is established in Turkey and encompasses an array of "social, economic, cultural, recreational and political interests with varying capacities to organise and command political resources" (p. 259). However, active social involvement in these associations is rather limited, with most being greatly influenced by religious, sanguineous, local, regional and economic ties.

The state does not oppose these associations, and in fact, frequently supports them, especially when they are set up in response to public needs. What it has little sympathy or toleration for, as Kalaycioğlu observes, however, are associations advocating "drastic change in the Republican system or the political regime" (p. 260). Examples of these associations include those which agitate for a federal system, claim special rights on the basis of ethnic grouping, or indeed even "women who cover their heads in the *türban* on religious grounds" (p. 260).

The state, though authoritarian, is weak and this hinders the development of civil society, for a "weak state extends its resources and boosts its capacity by ignoring large swathes of civil society, which it is not, in any case, able to regulate and control" (p. 261).

Consequently, only those associations "deemed to be security risks, are seriously monitored, prosecuted or suppressed. The rest are either simply left alone or co-operatively engaged" (p. 261). Nevertheless, as Kalaycioğlu illustrates in the case of traditionalist women's demands for headscarves being articulated in modern human-rights terms, things are changing. Older and narrower networks of soli-

Quick Review
Why is that despite the large number of civic organisations in Turkey, active involvement in them remains rather limited?

darity and trust based on kinship, may thus yet find newer expressions of associational life as, for example, expressions that are couched in civic rather than ethnic terms.

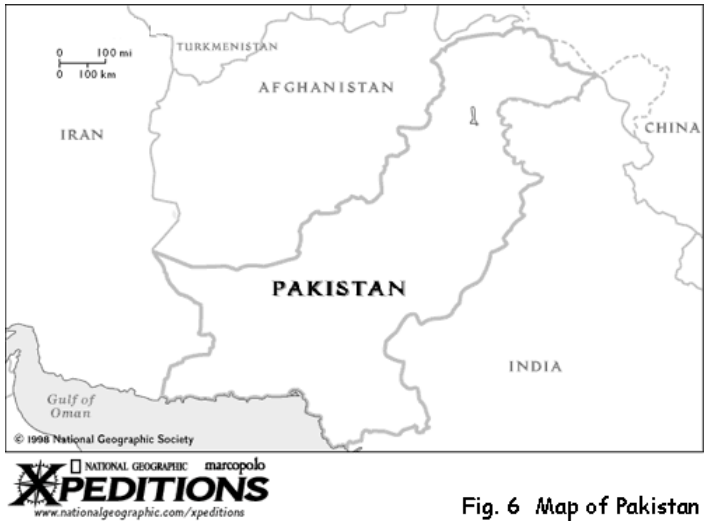


Fig. 6 Map of Pakistan

The problems of low levels of public trust, identity-politics, state mistrust of civic organisations, and controversy over the role of religion in public life remain a marked feature of Pakistan (Fig. 6) today. Taking into account civil society in the context of Islam, secularism and pluralism in South Asia, Iftikhar Malik in *Between Identity-Politics and Authoritarianism in Pakistan*, goes on to discuss the specific case of Pakistan, examining, amongst other things, its citizens' responses to formal and informal surveys "in 1997 on some fifty critical issues facing the nation, at domestic, regional and global levels" (p. 285).

He illustrates that despite the above-named obstacles, it appears that "ordinary Pakistanis see a future in democratisation and privileging of the social sector over competing ideological agendas" (p. 286). In addition, they

> remain a largely tolerant society supportive of equal rights for women and minorities. And they appear to harbour little animosity toward India despite the continuing legacy of bloody conflict (p. 286).

In the way that these responses are of particular relevance to NGOs in Pakistan, Malik ends by making a number of suggestions that he hopes will improve their efficacy and their perceptions by the public.

Quick Review
What are some of the obstacles faced by Pakistan in the development of civic life?

Conclusion

In all of these articles, the authors variously grapple with what, exactly, constitutes civil society and to what extent its stated markers are present

or can be found in Muslim contexts. Time and again, mention is made of the breadth of the use of the concept, raised as it is in different environments both academic and geographic. As Arkoun points out, one must note these differences while simultaneously seeking out commonalities of meanings. Sajoo reminds us, however, that ultimately,

> the idea of a global civil society is only meaningful in so far as ordinary citizens in less privileged and politically marginalised quarters partake of it. For the individual citizen, like civil society itself, needs deep if adventitious roots in the everyday context – the rhythms and resonances, the lifeworld – of local *terra firma* (p. 26).

Suggestions for Further Reading

The following suggestions constitute but a small and rather selective sample. Many more, of course, may be found in the bibliography of the book.

Esposito, John L. and John O. Voll. *Islam and Democracy.* New York & Oxford, 1996.

Hann, Chris and Elizabeth Dunn, ed. *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models.* London and New York, 1996.

Karim, Karim. H. *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence.* Montreal, 2000.

Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran.* Princeton, NJ, 1999.

Seligman, Adam B. *The Idea of Civil Society.* New York, 1992.

Reflections on Civil Society: Selected extracts from a speech made by His Highness the Aga Khan at the Annual Meeting of The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 5th May 2003.

What do I mean when I speak of civil society institutions? Of the three sectors -- government, private business and civil society -- it is the most diverse and the least well understood. Moreover I am not sure that even those who work on the sector define it in the same way. My purpose is not to enter into an academic discussion but only to ensure that I am understood. I prefer to think of civil society in the widest sense, including all sorts of organisations and initiatives. It includes much more for example than is captured by the term NGO. I would for instance include professional organisations that aim to uphold best practices, or that serve and contribute to a vibrant and effective business sector, such as chambers of commerce, and associations of accountants, bankers, doctors, lawyers and the like.

Civil society organisations are generally non-profit or not-for-profit - at least implicitly. They may, however, generate money from fees or services that they provide. This is the source of a great deal of confusion in many parts of the world because non-profit is frequently confused with charity-giving services or sustenance to the needy. The confusion is understandable because charity has a long history in all religious traditions, and renders real assistance to those not able to help themselves. Some civil society institutions should and will always be involved in charity. But those of a new type exist to provide services in return for fees that will cover some or all of the costs of operations including salaries, but not produce a profit for owners or investors. Perhaps "non-commercial" conveys the purpose and operating principles of civil society institutions in many parts of the world, more clearly than the term "non-profit."

Because most civil society institutions are non-commercial, and whatever dividends they produce contribute directly to the improvement of the quality of life of their beneficiaries, these institutions are faced with the fundamental problem of identifying financial resources that will keep them alive and enable them to grow.

At the heart of the issue is the question: "Is civil society bankable?" If so, what criteria should apply? The long history of the AKDN agencies has shown that while there are numerous financial institutions

and programmes that are available to support economic investment, non-commercial civil society institutions face the permanent threat of being systematically under-funded.

Within civil society in much of the developing world, there are professions which are critical to stable growth and to democracy, but which are systematically under resourced in terms of pay and opportunities for ongoing training. The three that I would cite today are: teachers, nurses and journalists. The economic status of these professions simply has to be corrected if the consequences are not going to be the progressive degradation of education, the progressive degradation of health care, and national media, which will be incompetent or open to all sorts of undesirable pressures including corruption. And yet, the additional costs of better remuneration to such professions will simply add to the end cost of the product, making it even more inaccessible to those who need it most, the poor.

Governments, donor agencies and others need to do more to create an environment that enables civil society institutions to emerge and develop. The basic issue is how to improve mutual understanding and create the conditions of confidence, and mutual predictability that will enable people and institutions to realise their full potential.

Pluralism, the recognition of people of diverse backgrounds and interests, organisations of different types and projects, different kinds and forms of creative expression, are all valuable and therefore deserving of recognition and support by government and society as a whole. Without support for pluralism, civil society does not function. Pluralism is also essential for peace, a statement that is unfortunately documented by armed conflict in contexts of cultural, ethnic, or religious differences on almost every continent at this time. It is of particular importance here in Central Asia given the demography of most countries.

If the international financial community were willing to look in depth at the problems that should be addressed in supporting non-commercial civil society institutions, some strategic goals should be set. The first one that I would propose to you is to ensure that as civil society grows it does so in a manner that it enhances public appreciation of the diversity of most people within common frontiers as an asset and not a liability. Events in recent years have shown in Eastern Europe, in the great lakes area of Africa, in numerous countries in Asia, including Afghanistan and Tajikistan, that there is a central need for these societies to develop in a way that each group within them feels valued and respected, and is encouraged to contribute to the goal of national development.

I do not believe that most people are born into an understanding or an environment where pluralism is seen as an asset, but on the other hand I am convinced that civil society institutions have a central role to play in bringing value to pluralism and inclusiveness. But again, who will fund the tools with which pluralism will find its way into civil society, as a central necessity for civilised life in the future?

For the full text of this speech, log on to www.akdn.org/speeches/14_tashkent.htm