

## **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN SRI LANKA: THEIR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES**

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### **Introduction**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have assumed considerable importance in developing countries at present. This being so, CSOs have emerged as possible observers to keep a check on the state while making positive contributions to human society at large. Civil society, commonly accepted, is a sphere of institutions, organizations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests (Ernest Gellner: 1994, p. 15). A need for and the vitality of extra-regional associations based on specific needs have now become a matter of urgency. It is within this scenario that we see the emergence of civil society institutions in South Asia and in particular, Sri Lanka.

### **Objectives**

The paper is an attempt to research the strengths and weaknesses of CSOs in Sri Lanka. They have begun to influence the respective governments by way of trying to achieve democracy, good governance, equality, peace and sustainable development. An attempt will be made to examine in depth the role of civil society organizations, their strengths and weaknesses, taking the Presidential Elections of November 2005 as an example.

### **Methodology**

The author has made use of a case study of three political CSOs as the methodology adopted to arrive at his conclusions. One-to-one interviews with the heads of three CSOs that are directly involved in being watchdogs on the politics of the country (Nira Wickremasinghe: 2001, p.13) were done while, one-to-one interviews with academics

from the capital city of Colombo who have done extensive research on CSO's and who are associated with the relevant CSO entities were also done to get first hand information on the role and perception of the CSO's in Sri Lanka.

### **Research problem**

Since 1983, not even the government in power has had a chance of closely observing the services of the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the INGO culture that was willingly offered to the country. This being the case, the CSO and NGO/INGO culture seems to contain in them certain strengths and weaknesses. Taking the Presidential Elections of November 2005 as an example, the author addresses the research problem by trying to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

### **Discussion**

The discussion will illustrate the strengths as well as the weaknesses of CSOs taking into consideration the Presidential Elections of November 2005 which very clearly illustrates the degree of effectiveness and impact of CSOs on the elections. A comparatively free and fair election was held partly due to the services of the CSOs, except for two very distinct, but unexpected developments that occurred during the course of the election day, namely the boycott of elections in the LTTE controlled areas of the North and the East of the country, and the names of voters in particular electorates in the city of Colombo going missing in the electoral registers. With regard to all other abuses malpractices and shortcomings, both by the government in power and the opposition, the CSOs actively put a check on them and duly reported such abuses to the relevant authorities as earlier

stated. CSO involvement in the elections was crucial when one learns of the fact that the winning candidate won the elections by a mere 187,000 majority votes. The election was relatively "free" in the sense that there was less voter intimidation outside the North and East. But in N/E it certainly it was not free because of the boycott of elections spearheaded by the LTTE. It also shows how limited the CSOs influence was because LTTE totally disregarded CSO appeals.

### Conclusion

Whether the state permits it or not and whether these non-state actors have performed their tasks positively or not, CSOs have assumed an important role as a non state actor in the modern world at present. The unraveling story of the CSO's is what we see today and the consequences of its presence is at times very positive while at times it could connote some negative implications as well. That is determined solely by which and what time and space these entities perform their multifarious tasks. While the strengths of the CSOs will be spoken of from the very beginning of the presentation, the weaknesses will be highlighted at the end. Of them, the spatial limitations, mis-management, transparency and accountability, a lack of presence in rural areas, an antagonistic attitude towards the state, the inability to influence macro policies, a lack of credible and charismatic individuals, the consideration of service as a form of employment and not as a voluntary service, a language barrier

between the centre and the periphery, the measurement and disparity of civil society, the status of CSOs in the LTTE controlled areas, the paradox and a conflict between "bonding" and "bridging" (Neil Davotta: 2004, p. 114), CSOs in Sri Lanka being a part of political society, the failure of the state's apparatus in not having clearly recognized civil society institutions, and lastly, the pecuniary benefits dominating the services of civil society institutions rather than their cherished objectives can be identified as the weaknesses of CSOs in Sri Lanka.

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