



Pandemic and Global Civil Society: Shifting the Power Balance toward the State?

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Abstract

This paper discusses about the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global civil society. It mainly focuses on how the pandemic is reducing the power of the global civil society in international politics while it is reinforcing the power of the state. Prominent theories of international relations, such as Realism, liberalism and constructivism assert the primacy of state in international politics while giving little importance to global civil society as an actor. However, the advocates of global civil society claim that, currently, global civil society is a much important actor in international politics. They also assert that states are gradually losing power to the global civil society. This paper argues that the pandemic has reversed this trend and shifted the power balance towards the state. Using the realist critic this paper argues that the pandemic has impacted international politics in a way that is reinforcing the primacy of the state and weakening the global civil society. As a result, global civil society is losing their ability to counter the state in world politics and are being forced to comply with the interests of the state.

Keywords: Global Civil Society; State-Civil Society Relations; International Relations; Covid-19

Introduction

The ongoing novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) has caused a great health crisis in the world. Millions of people have been infected and thousands of people have died already. The virus has reached all over the world and infected every country. Due to its spreading speed and fatality rate World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the disease as a pandemic. The impacts of this pandemic are not only limited to health issues. Every aspects of human life such as economic, political, cultural and social have been impacted by this pandemic. It is now understandable that it has shaped human life in such a way that life will never be the same again. This is also true for the political affairs which is currently going through a change and that change will have long term impacts.

The Pandemic is reshaping the political sphere and the relations among political actors at both domestic and international level. Using the pandemic different political actors are trying to enhance their power and authority. However, the pandemic has shifted the power balance in favor of state while other non-state actors are losing their power. It has reinforced the primacy of the state and has weakened the global governance and cooperation (Bieber, 2020). Commenting on the pandemic, Stephen M. Walt, a key scholar of the realist school, has asserted *"the pandemic will strengthen the state and reinforce nationalism. Governments of all types will adopt emergency measures to manage the crisis, and many will be loath to relinquish these new powers when the crisis is over"* (Allen, et al., 2020).



In this paper it is argued that the pandemic has impacted the global politics and the state-civil society relations in a way that is reducing the power of the global civil society while increasing the power of the state, therefore, shifting the power balance towards the state. This is reinforcing the realist assumption of state primacy in international politics. The pandemic has brought about several changes in the global political environment, all of which together are enhancing state authority. Using the realist critic this paper argues that in this changed environment global civil society is gradually losing their ability to counter the domination of the nation state and are being forced to comply with the interests of the state. Not only they are being forced to comply with the state interests, they are also serving the interests of the state by becoming a tool of the state.

Global Civil Society

The term civil society is not something new, but it had different connotations at different times. For early modern thinkers, like Hobbes and Locke, Civil society was something that was different from the state of nature (Kastrati, 2016). There was no distinction between the civil society and the state, which was formed through the social contract and governed by the laws (Kaldor, 2003). It was in the 19th century, political theorists, such as Hegel and Thomas Paine, drew a distinction between state and civil society. According to Hegel, civil society is separated from as well as an intermediate realm between the family and the state. His definition of civil society included the economic sphere (Jaysawal, 2013).

The definition again narrowed in the 20th century by Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci civil society is a realm of culture, ideology and political debate that is outside of the state, market and the family (Kaldor, 2003). Contemporary understating of civil society is largely shaped by the idea of Antonio Gramsci. Now It is considered the third sector outside of the state and the market, and through this people try to put forward their common interests. The Centre for Civil Society of the London School of Economics has an illustrative working definition of civil society. It defines civil society as *“the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power”* (Centre for Civil Society, 2004).

For a long time, the idea of civil society was tied to the territorial boundary. At the second half of the twentieth century, like other aspects of human spheres, civil society started to achieve a global dimension due to the growing interconnectedness, increasing travel and communications. The advent of internet and subsequent globalization after the 1990 have given civil society a much more globalized form. Though it would be totally wrong to consider global civil society (movements, groups, organizations, institutions that operate at global level) as the product after the second half of the twentieth century, rather it is their number and discussions about them that have been growing since the mid twentieth century. Global civil society can be defined as the “third sector” on the global level, which is distinguished from as well as an alternative to the state centric international order and the networks of global market (Chandhoke, 2002). Anheier, Galsius and Kaldor have given a purely descriptive definition of global civil society, who define global civil society as *“the*

sphere of ideas, values, institutions, organisations, networks, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market and operating beyond the confines of national societies, politics, and economies" (Anheier, Glasius, & Kaldor, 2001). Global civil society involves in activities that: "(a) addresses transworld issues; (b) involves transborder communication; (c) has a global organization; and (d) works on a premise of supranational solidarity" (Scholte, 1999). Global civil society is different from domestic civil society in the sense that they have one or several of these four characteristics. Due to their shared interests and values, different groups and organizations as well as citizens from different countries defy their national boundary and come together to influence the social, political and economic decision-making process on international level and thus become a part of the global civil society. Epistemic communities, transnational advocacy networks, social movements, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) are some of the examples of global civil society.

Global Civil Society in International Relations

Mary Kaldor (2003) claims that there are three main paradigms of global civil society in the post 1990. First is the "new social movement" in issues like peace, women, human rights and environment. Transnational networks of activists have come together through these movements and have strengthened the global governance. Second, the term global civil society includes global institutions like NGOs, which the author termed as "neoliberal version" of global civil society. These NGOs are the tamed social movement within the global order.¹ Third, there is a postmodern version which includes new religious and ethnic movements emanating from the non-western world (Kaldor, 2003). From the discussion of Kaldor it becomes evident that the global civil society refers to the non-state actors from the perspective of International Relations. However, they are different from other non-state actors like Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), Transnational Corporations (TNC), Multinational Corporations (MNC) and violent arms groups in the sense that they are non-governmental, non-profit and non-violent pressure groups that seek to influence international politics to serve the public interests. The international system is still dominated by states and there is little possibility of transformation in the near future. The role of global civil society as non-state actor in international relations is explained differently by different theories of International Relations.

Realist, Liberal and Constructivist Assumption about Global Civil Society

As one of the dominant paradigms or theories of international relations, realism gives little importance to non-state actors. Realism is not a unified theory and has different variants; classical realism, neorealism, offensive realism, defensive realism, neo-classical realism. All the variants consider state as the main actor in international relations (Fernando, 2018). As a most prominent variant of realism, neo-realism, also called structural realism, assumes that the international system is anarchic. In an anarchical system, state as a main actor relies on "self-help" to ensure its survival. To ensure its survival, state tries to maximize its power. Though neo-realism advocates the existence of non-state actors in

¹ According to Kaldor (2003) social movements always rise and fall, and when they fall, they either become "tamed", that means institutionalized and professionalized, or they become marginal and disappear or turn into violence. By becoming tamed, they become the partners in negotiations in both domestic and global level.



international politics, ultimately it assumes the primacy of the state. Through the interactions of the states, the structure of the international political system is formed and they make the rules by which other actors operate (Waltz, 1979). However, realists have also argued that the non-state actors like think tanks, advocacy networks, NGOs are used by the powerful states to promote their interests (Josselin & Wallace, 2001).

Liberalism, another dominant paradigm of international relations, also emphasizes the primacy of states, but in contrast to realism, it also emphasizes the importance of non-state actors in the global political interaction (Ahmed & Potter, 2006). Liberals believe that such civil society actors can have strong influences in areas like agenda setting, norms, interests, identities and policies (Lynch, 2008; Ozkan & Cetin, 2016). Regime theory, derived from the liberal tradition, posits that regime² can foster the cooperation among states by affecting their behavior. Non-state actors have important role to play in forming and sustaining regimes. Actors like interest groups, transnational coalitions have critical roles to play in formulating international regulations. For example, environmental groups play important role in formulating intentional environmental regulation to protect the environment (Ahmed & Potter, 2006).

Constructivism places a little more emphasize on non-state actors than realism and liberalism. Constructivism criticizes the realist assumption of anarchy and claims that international system is not fixed, rather the international environment is determined through interaction of the state and other actors. Specific ideas, norms and values promoted by non-state actors help to shape the international politics. They view international NGOs as independent entity outside of government control (Fernando, 2018). Constructivists also assume that non-state actors like NGOs cannot exercise same power as state, rather they exercise power through persuasion and communication (Ahmed & Potter, 2006).

Enthusiastic Advocates' Assumption of Global Civil Society

The enthusiastic advocates of global civil society consider it as a more powerful actor in international politics than realist, liberal or constructivist consideration. They see global civil society as a way to transform the existing order and to challenge the domination of powerful states, large corporations and bureaucratic international organizations (Dryzek, 2012). According to some, global civils society is ending the roles of the nation states in some sectors as well as weakening its power in other sectors and forcing it to mutation and adaptation (Choudhary, 2004). Some less enthusiastic advocates argue that global civil society is able to exercise some degree of compulsory power over states and their representatives using the techniques of information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics and accountability politics (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Lipschutz (1992) argues that global civil society as transnational actors are challenging the nation state system from below as well as their growth is contributing to the re-construction, re-imagination and re-mapping of the world politics. According to him three changes in the present international system are contributing to the emergence of global civil society. First is the fading away of anarchy as international order among states and it is being replaced by global capitalist culture. Second, State is unable to deal with certain social

² Regime is defined as the "sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations" (Krasner, 1983).



welfare at micro level which requires increasing efforts from non-state actors. Third, the old form of political identity centered on states are crumbling and there is a growth of new form of political and social identity which are challenging Gramscian hegemony of statist world politics.

Scholte (1999) claims that the degree of sovereignty traditionally exercised by the state is being compromised by the emergence of global civil society. Global civil society is affecting the politics through five developments: emergence of multi-layered governance at local, national, regional and global level; privatization of governance where global civil society is being involved in formulation and implementation of some regulations; reconstruction of collective identities at substate as well as at extraterritorial level; reconstruction of citizenship idea and emergence of “world citizen”; and lastly the progression of democratic practice in global governance. These five developments together are reducing the state centrism and curving up some degree of sovereign power of the state.

With the time, the number of the global civil society organizations are increasing (Anheier, Glasius, & Kaldor, 2001) and they are becoming more more powerful in international politics. Their enhanced power is represented through their increasing involvement in global governance as well as in other areas of state authority (Popovski, 2010; Mishra, 2012). Authority is understood in relative form. When authority of one party is increased, it reduces the authority of other parties. So according to this argument, with the time, the authority of the state has been reducing, as the global civil society is becoming more and more powerful and curving up some of the state authorities.

Global Civil Society and the Pandemic

The enthusiastic advocates of global civil society strongly argue that global civil society is a powerful actor in international politics and their power is growing continuously. They have the ability to counter the interests of the state and global market. However, the pandemic has impacted the politics in a way that their argument sounds implausible. Using the pandemic, nation state is reinforcing their power while curving up the power of other non-state actors in international politics. Global civil society is no exception to this trend. As an actor of international politics, they are losing their power as a counterforce of the state as well as the market. Ultimately, they are being forced to comply with the state interests and sometimes they are being used by the state to serve their interests. Covid-19 has brought about four changes in international political environment and the state-civil society relations that is reinforcing the state power and weakening the global civil society.

Increasing State Control and Restrictions on Social Mobilization

The pandemic has been playing an instrumental role in increasing state power and tightening the state control over other political actors. Governments have been using the pandemic to tighten up their authoritarian and autocratic power (Youngs, 2020). As a result, democratic freedom and civil liberties are diminishing. In the name lockdown and physical distancing state has been enforcing restrictions on peoples’ movement and this is making people unable to meet and organize. As a result, the states are now in more control over social mobilization than ever. Many civil society organizations are forced to hold their planned activities. Also, they are forced to take their activities in online. They are using social media platform to criticize and to create pressure on governments about different



policies and actions regarding Covid-19. Governments are also increasing their surveillance and trying to control the internet in the name of defending misinformation and anti-national activities. In this situation, the possibility of success through online activities without involving in on field activities remains under question.

Also, the civil society actors working on issues other than the pandemic are getting less attention. Governments are using the pandemic to shift the focus from other critical issues and trying to tighten up their political grip on critical voices by weakening checks and balances, imposing censorship and expanding state surveillance (Brechenmacher, Carothers, & Youngs, 2020). To the leaders of the states, the pandemic is an opportunity to pursue the statist political goal.

Covid-19 has not only changed internal dynamics of the state, it has also changed the external dynamics. Global arrangements are failing to take sufficient measures to prevent the crisis and its consequences. Nation state is making to come back using this crisis (Rachman, 2020). Also, states are proved to be the best useful in tackling the crisis which in turn increasing the legitimacy and validity of the states in the eyes of the people. As a result, People around the world are looking towards their own governments for strong leadership in responding to the pandemic.

The pandemic has also reduced the speed of the globalization and the world is going towards deglobalization at least for the short and medium term. Protectionist and nationalist policies are getting priorities. States have been enforcing more border restrictions. However, in the peak time of the spread, national borders were totally closed. The long-term consequences of this will be increasingly tougher regulations and controls over the transborder movements of the people, services and goods. As a result, the transborder, transnational working environment of the global civil society have been shrinking. They are finding it increasingly difficult to working remotely in other region or country. In contrast, States are being able to exercise more and more control over them.

Global Civil Society Is Becoming a Tool of the State

Since the Covid-19 has started, most of the civil society actors have shifted their activities from policy and advocacy to service providing and become engaged in emergency relief to tackle the immediate calamities brought by the pandemic. The pandemic has also changed their way of delivering services. Across different countries and cities, they are trying to deliver economic and medical supports to the vulnerable community. They are involved in activities like raising money, delivering medical supplies, disinfecting public spaces, identifying families with needs, providing foods. Not only the material supports they are also raising awareness among people by providing the information about the virus and the ways to prevent it. They are providing these services voluntarily as well as by partnering with the governments (Brechenmacher, Carothers, & Youngs, 2020).

Governments sometimes use global civil society actors, especially NGOs, to implement governmental decisions in issues like development in other countries. As the authority of a government is limited to their territorial boundary, sometime they rely on these types of transnational actors for implementing their decisions in other regions. As a result, state actors have control over the outcome (Baumann & Stengel, 2014). This also helps them to avoid political criticism in international as well as in domestic arena. Since the Covid-19 has started, developed countries have been relying on civil society organizations to tackle the pandemic related calamities in developing world. The developed countries are channeling a



portion of their fund through the civil society organizations in different projects of developing countries without involving the governments of those countries.

There is already a debate that working on government project or relying on government funding makes civil society less efficient as a counterpart of state. Rather it makes them a tool of the state that are being used by the states to implement their policies. Since the inception of the Covid-19, civil society organizations are more engaged state sponsored projects, therefore, they are becoming more a tool of the powerful state rather than a counterforce. This also reinforced the realist critic of global civil society serving the interests of the powerful states.

Global Civil Society Actors Becoming Weaker and Reducing Their Engagement in Policy and Actions

The Covid-19 has a huge negative effect on global economy. On the one hand it has reduced the economic activity therefore, on the macro level, the revenues of the business organizations and the taxes of the governments are reducing. On the other hand, governments and other actors are forcing to distribute their budgets to tackle the pandemic. This has a huge impact on the funding of the civil society organizations. Established organizations are losing their important sources of funding from private firms and governments. Studies have found that 42% of the civil society organizations have lost their funding for their current program due to the pandemic while 75% of them are concerned that there will be less funding available this year. 50% of the civil society organizations are worried that they would have to close within three months without additional funding (LINC, 2020). There is already a debate that powerful states control the activities of civil society through funding. The cut of funding is making the situation much worse for the global civil society actors. The reduction of funds is weakening the civil society organizations and reducing their power as a counterforce of the state. Due to the reduced funds, they are forced to stop the ongoing projects on different issues as well as forced to take cost cutting measures which is reducing their area of activities.

One may argue about civil society's engagement in international decision-making process and their influences on the decisions. They are included in decision making process mainly for two reasons; firstly, to obtain useful information and expertise in certain field, secondly, to enhance the legitimacy for global governance (Böhmelt, Koubi, & Bernauer, 2013). This may be interpreted as civil society's increasing authority in international politics, but this may be also be interpreted as state use civil society, as an instrument, to gain information and legitimacy regarding their own decisions. As, ultimately the interests and the decisions of powerful states prevail, the latter interpretation sounds more meaningful. This is also happening regarding the Covid-19. Global governance mechanism is pursuing the policies that support the states' and business communities' interests more than the global civil society.

Also, the fast and decisive response regarding the pandemic is reducing the space for civil society in decision making process. There is a possibility that this practice will likely to be incorporated in other issue areas. However, some argue that this is a temporary practice. In contrast to this argument, it can be said that it will have long term impacts on the decision-making procedures. The responsible authority will find this process more attractive as it offers shortcut, higher speed and efficiency regarding policy making. Therefore, the authority will less likely to leave this practice in the near future.

Governments also try to reduce the involvement of global civil society actors in the local issues by arguing global civil society actors as unaccountable, illegitimate, foreign actors who have no connection with the community they claim to represent (Brechenmacher, Carothers, & Youngs, 2020). These arguments are also used in this pandemic to reduce the involvement of global civil society actors in policy process and in on field activities regarding the Covid-19.

Declining of Extraterritorial Collective Identity and the Rise of Nationalism

For the last few decades, the territory-based collective identity has been being replaced by the extraterritorial collective identity based on race, religion, ethnicity and culture. Also, along with the idea of state citizen, there is an emerging idea of “world citizen” (Scholte, 1999). These trends have contributed to the development of multicultural, multinational ideas and played important roles in the emergence of global civil society. Recently, there have been also the emergence of opposite trends to these multicultural, multinational ideas. For the last few years, there has been the rise of nationalism and authoritarian populism around the world (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Munich Security Report, 2020). As a result, the emerging multicultural, multinational ideas are already being threatened even before the pandemic has started and from the inception it has increased these trends. It is reinforcing the pre-existing nationalist dynamics (Bieber, 2020).

Historically it has been noted that in a pandemic situation xenophobia increases and the pandemic itself is responsible for this increased xenophobia. Covid-19 is no different to this. It has increased xenophobia around the world by producing fear, discrimination and exclusion. Media discourse and political speech discourse (such as Donald Trump’s remarks of Covid-19 as “Chinese virus”) regarding Covid-19 have played an instrumental role in creating this xenophobia (Noel, 2020; Brechenmacher, Carothers, & Youngs, 2020). Hate speech and stigmatization about certain groups and making them responsible for spreading virus have been reported all around the world. Such as in West Asians are made responsible for spreading virus and anti-Asian sentiments are increasing there. The us vs them identification are becoming more prevalent and the nationalist sentiments among people are getting stronger day by day.

For the state, current policies are national responses prioritizing national population (Afsahi, Beausoleil, Dean, Ercan, & Gagnon, 2020). Regarding the pandemic and states’ response to it, the consequence will be the rise of global nationalism even after the pandemic ends. (Rachman, 2020). As a result, the transnational and global ideas, based on which the global civil society is formed is becoming weaker. Both the nation-state and the people within are losing their interests in transnationalism and globalism. On the other hand, this trend is reinforcing state power in the global politics.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 has affected the world politics in a way that is shifting the power balance towards the state and increasing the primacy of the state in international politics. In this process all the non-state actors including global civil society are losing their power and influence in the in the international politics. Because of the crisis, states are being able to exercise more control over people and therefore being able to restrict the social mobilization. Increased authoritarianism and autocracy have been noticed everywhere. It has also affected the process of globalization and the world is currently going through



deglobalization. More border restrictions have been imposed which is reducing the transborder movement. On the other hand, global civil society organizations are forced to change their activities due to the pandemic. They are more involved in relief activities and state sponsored projects which are ultimately serving the interests of the state. Also, the pandemic has affected the global economy negatively. This has effects on global civil society in the sense that it is reducing their fund which is making their existence vulnerable and weak. Due to the crisis governments are trying to take fast and decisive policy response which is also reducing their involvement in the policy process. Lastly, the pandemic is reinforcing the already existing nationalism and xenophobia. As a result, the multinational, multicultural idea of global society is fading.

All these changes brought by this pandemic working together to reduce the power of the global civil society in relation to state. At the same time, they are increasing state's power and authority in international politics. This is reinforcing the realist assumption that the state is the primary actor in international politics and global civil society serves the interests of the powerful states.

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