What Civil Society Can Do To Reform, Deepen, And Improve Democracy

By

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A specter is haunting the democracies of the world. It is troubling not only the Trilateral countries (to paraphrase the subtitle of a very important recent book on the problem), but (to one degree or another) most of the democracies of the developing and postcommunist states as well. It afflicts democracies of very long standing (including the oldest) and those of more recent vintage (which have emerged during the post-1974 “third wave” of global democratization). This specter, in a word (Pharr and Putnam’s), is disaffection.

Throughout the established democracies, in Japan, the North America, and Europe, confidence in government is broadly in decline. Citizens are cynical about their representative institutions, political parties, and most of all, their politicians. Trust or confidence in these institutions is almost everywhere low (in the sense that more than half the public are generally cynical or distrusting) and it has been steadily declining. Indeed, Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton conclude that “there is evidence of some decline in confidence in politicians in 12 out of 13 countries for which systematic data are available.”

It is not just a matter of cynicism or distrust. Disaffection is a broader phenomenon, encompassing as well detachment and even alienation. Both individual political efficacy—the sense that one’s own individual participation can make a difference—and system efficacy—the belief that the system is capable of solving the basic problems confronting the country, appear to be declining. Identification with and attachment to political parties are weakening. In some countries, there is evidence of significant decline in satisfaction with the way democracy works (though this variable is much more sensitive to short-term swings in economic performance).
Disaffection is an even more serious problem outside the Trilateral democracies, in two respects. First, in some of these countries, the levels of distrust and alienation are much higher. For example, satisfaction with the way democracy works averaged only 37 percent in Latin America in 2000, compared to 53 percent among EU countries (1997-1999), 45 percent in Korea (2000), and generally under 40 percent in Central and Eastern Europe (1996). In the Trilateral democracies, trust or confidence in parliament averaged 43 percent in the early 1990s, down from 48 percent a decade earlier. This is nothing compared to the postcommunist states, where confidence in the national parliament averaged around 22 percent in 1997-98, the same as in Korea in 1997. Only Taiwan (42 percent in 1998) had a comparable level. The comparison between the “disaffected” Trilateral democracies and Latin America is particularly striking. In Latin America in 2000 (averaging across seventeen democracies), only 28 percent of the public expressed at least some degree of confidence in parliament (the Congress) and only about a third in the judiciary. Only in five Latin Americans have confidence in political parties, and among the states of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, the proportion is only one in eight. This is part of a diffuse legacy of distrust of parties and state institutions hanging over from the communist era. Overall, as revealed in the Table below, if the Trilateral democracies are ailing, many of the third-wave democracies are in serious danger.

And second, the implications of disaffection are much more serious in countries where democracy is not firmly consolidated—which is the case for most of the third-wave democracies of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the postcommunist world. Where the legitimacy of democracy is not deeply rooted at all levels of society, dissatisfaction and disaffection with democracy are much more likely to obstruct the accumulation of legitimacy.
and eventually to give rise to preferences for (or diminished resistance to) the return of some form of authoritarian rule.\textsuperscript{6}

Table

Trust in Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region or Country</th>
<th>Judiciary</th>
<th>Police</th>
<th>Military</th>
<th>Legislature</th>
<th>Civil Service</th>
<th>Parties</th>
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<td>70</td>
<td>46</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-Communist States (11) 1997-98</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korea 1997</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan 1998</td>
<td>43</td>
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What is generating the broad (though far from uniform) decline in institutional trust in the Trilateral democracies, and the very low levels (and in at least some cases, sharp declines) in institutional trust among developing democracies? It may well be the case, as Newton and Norris suggest, that low levels of social trust and civic engagement on the part of citizens indirectly contribute to rising disaffection, by inhibiting governmental performance. But I strongly agree with them that the heart of the answer lies in the actual performance of
governments and political institutions, which of course is always filtered through perceptions, shaped intensively in the contemporary era by the electronic mass media.

Poor economic performance does diminish satisfaction with the way democracy works. However, this is usually temporary. The statistical data are still fragmentary and rudimentary, but a wealth of qualitative and historical analysis of developing democracies I think points to a much more powerful driving force. As Susan Pharr demonstrates in her analysis of Japan, declining or (in new democracies) persistently low levels of trust in public institutions are driven much more by political than economic or policy performance, what she calls “conduct in office.” Perceptions of official misconduct—generated by the interaction between actual misconduct and media exposure of it—are significantly correlated with declines in public confidence in government.7 And as della Porta shows in the cases of Italy, Germany, and France, entrenched corruption (most dramatically in Italy) generates gross maladministration which interacts in a vicious circle with public disaffection and distrust. The Italian experience of pervasive, institutionalized misuse of public resources for party and personal enrichment (and the ultimate instability of this system) is particularly important for its generalizability to so many African, Latin American and other developing democracies.8

Although the statistical data are lacking, I want to generalize this argument about political performance one step further. I believe the single most powerful factor driving the growth of political alienation, detachment, and disaffection in the Trilateral democracies—and locking many emerging democracies into these negative attitudes from very early on—is not merely a succession of individual scandals but the general sense that politicians and government officials are a privileged class onto themselves. The mass media feed with frenzy on this cynical view
and pounce on any story that substantiates it. But I do not believe they create the view out of nothing. It is grounded in reality.

Part of the reality of self-serving, unresponsive, and unaccountable governance may derive from the change in the nature of political parties in many advanced democracies. It has been widely argued that parties have evolved over the past century from ideologically distinctive and compelling mass-membership organizations that touched and even enveloped a large proportion of the citizenry toward more generic “catch-all” parties and then toward “cartel parties.” As the latter term implies, the new model of party appears more separated than ever from society, as party leaders use public financing and expanded state functions to restrain competition and perpetuate themselves in power for power’s sake.  

However, disaffection springs from a much broader accumulation of institutional deficiencies in the functioning of democracy that inhibit public accountability and good governance. Systems of party and campaign finance are deeply flawed in many democracies—old and new—permitting the raw purchase of power and influence by privileged interests. Citizens seem powerless to change this system, but the media is certainly not powerless to expose it and rail against it. The combination of an essentially corrupt system of party and campaign finance, with a stream of actual instances of corruption, and a backlog of public aspirations for more responsive government that go unmet (while being amplified by a cynical media) generate growing public disillusionment with democratic politics and government. In the established democracies—the Trilateral democracies plus a few others (for example India, Costa Rica, Israel)—disaffection or even disillusionment does not translate into delegitimation, because the values of democracy and belief in the superiority of democracy to any other form of
government are simply too deeply rooted in norms and conventions. But where democracy is not so legitimated, poor political performance—and in particular a visible and intractable set of corrupt or sleazy practices—are obstructing democratic consolidation and endangering the future of democracy.

There is only one way out of this low-level (or not very appealing) equilibrium trap. It is not by taming the mass media to be more positive and “responsible.” It is not simply by generating greater and more positive types of social capital, though that is certainly a part of the challenge. It is not going to come by getting people to be less cynical or demanding in their attitudes, or by reversing globalization. The only solution to the problem is political reform. If the performance of political institutions is wanting, then it must be improved. Political institutions must be made more accountable, transparent, and responsive to the public will and in particular to the public good. New, stronger procedures are needed to root out not only gross, explicit corruption, but the kind of insider dealing and institutionalized influence-peddling that generates the most fundamental cause of the drift toward disaffection: the diffuse perception “that the political system is fundamentally unfair.”

BUILDING COALITIONS FOR POLITICAL REFORM

Sources of Political Reform

Political reform to improve or build institutions of accountability can come from four possible sources: from inside, from above, from outside, and from below. First, actors from inside key
institutions, such as the judiciary, the parliament, or the party system, may lead a campaign for reform. The actions of dogged and courageous public prosecutors, who brought down many of Italy’s most prominent political leaders in the *mani pulite* ("clean hands") campaign, were crucial in triggering the movement for political reform in that country in the early 1990s. Second, the initiative for institutional reform may come from above, from top leaders in the government and the party system. Third, pressure for reform may come from outside the system, from powerful actors in the international community who demand better governance, identify targets for political reform, impose sanctions or conditionality, and provide technical assistance to induce those reforms. These international pressures may come not only from powerful governments and multilateral institutions (especially the development banks), but also (increasingly) from “transnational civil society,” organizations and networks that tie together civil society activists across numerous borders around powerful common principles and goals, such as human rights or the environment. Finally, reform may be driven from below, by organized efforts in civil society.

My arguments here are twofold. First, effective reform of corrupted, occluded, and unfair political systems typically must be led from outside the political system, but *from inside the country*, in civil society. The reasons for this should be self-evident. On their own, bureaucratic or political insiders lack the motive or at least the opportunity for reform. Most people in positions of influence in the state bureaucracy, the parliament, and the party system have acquired their influence as a result of the system, and they are reluctant to push for change. Patterns of privilege and influence are notoriously difficult to change in a settled system precisely because those with power and privilege will fight to maintain them, and they typically have superior resources with which to defend their vested interests. Insiders, even at
middle and higher levels, cannot typically on their own mobilize the power to challenge the system successfully. And all their incentives press them to go along. By the same token, in the absence of some kind of powerful and organized mobilization by society, leaders sympathetic to institutional reform to overhaul corrupt and unfair political practices do not make it to the top, and if they do, they do not survive for long. Without an organized base of independent support in society, and without enormous pressure from below, top political leaders cannot transform an encrusted system of privilege on their own. Third, international actors lack the legitimacy (and usually the knowledge as well as the power) to simply impose reforms on state elites. Even if international actors have the power to impose demands for change, if there is no informed and organized base of support for such reforms in society, political leaders will find a way to short-circuit and circumvent them. Many African political leaders have played just such a “cat-and-mouse” game with the international donors, even such powerful donors as the World Bank, the IMF, and the major U.S. and European official aid agencies.

Thus, comprehensive political reform requires a leading role for civil society. The impetus and agenda for reform must come, to a very substantial degree, from independent, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), interest groups, think tanks, foundations, universities, and intellectuals and commentators outside the embedded structure of influence in the political system. Only these sectors of national life, in civil society, have the independence to look at the political system critically and comprehensively, and then to identify and campaign for the scope of reform that is needed.
Civil society cannot do it alone, however, and that is the second point. Any institutional reform that threatens to alter entrenched and predictable systems of privilege and access will be vigorously opposed—and by actors with vast political resources. Favored business and other sectoral elites and constituencies, territorial units, party factions and organizations, and bureaucratic actors will use their strategic resources to discredit, divide, dispirit, and ultimately defeat reform initiatives, unless they are ultimately confronted with superior power.

The one advantage that reformers have is that power in a democracy ultimately derives from the people, and the survey data reviewed above abundantly demonstrate that in most democracies today, the people are not happy with the existing political system. The challenge for political reformers is a strategic one: to determine how political disaffection can be transformed from a sum of negative responses—cynicism, withdrawal, resignation, or cooptation—into a constructive readiness and hopefulness to campaign for institutional change. This involves an enormous shift in political calculations and even political culture. As della Porta trenchantly notes, corrupt or heavily biased systems of power and privilege may constitute a bad and “ultimately unstable” equilibrium, but they do generate many reinforcing features of an equilibrium. If they do not withdraw entirely, most cynical and disaffected citizens accept and use the system out of despair for any better alternative.

The challenge confronting a reform campaign is thus heavily a moral and psychological one. It must not only articulate a powerful normative case against the system—that it is unfair to ordinary citizens and interests and bad for the country—but also a political bias for hope: that the system can be changed. The latter requires demonstrations of power—of broad support for
change—that demolish the monolithic inevitability of the system and generate a realistic promise of systemic change. Just as entrenched privileges are mutually reinforcing, so can the movement for change be self-reinforcing, by mobilizing enough power to give citizens an incentive not to resign themselves, not to be coopted for a small share that is nevertheless still better than nothing. And the more power that is mobilized by a movement for change, the more likely it is to bring defections from within the system, in the parties and the bureaucracy in particular. Reformers (usually parliamentary backbenchers or marginal elites) can draw the courage to act on their frustrations and visions for change, to bolt from their parties or challenge for leadership positions. Bureaucrats can become emboldened to speak out, to leak information to the movement for change and to the mass media, and even to play a “Trojan horse” role. When a campaign for reform develops visible momentum, reform-minded insiders are more inclined to take risks, and even some shrewd pragmatists with no principled commitment to change may discern that the more promising political future lies in embracing reform rather than resisting it.

What are the sources of power and momentum that pro-reform forces in civil society must mobilize? I have already mentioned one: norms. It is important not to draw too sharp a distinction between power and morality. In a democracy, and especially a liberal democracy (even a fairly cynical one), appeals to basic principles—justice, fairness, accountability, transparency, the rule of law—can begin to arouse popular attention and sentiment. But this can only be done if those principles are effectively contrasted with the rot in the current system, and if the case is embraced by credible and respected voices in the society, particularly religious leaders or revered intellectuals. One cannot stress too heavily the importance of seeding the political terrain with compelling moral and logical arguments for change.
Information is a second source of power. Forces in civil society need to document compellingly the faults of the current system and the specific and manifold ways that it confers unfair advantages on a variety of privileged actors. The rest of society may know this dimly, but not with sufficient clarity or conviction to be moved to action. Moreover, as Italy’s *mani pulite* scandal demonstrates, even when society is broadly aware of “the way the system works,” citizens at large, opinion leaders, and the mass media may not understand the scope and degree of unfairness and corruption. That is why we use the term *scandal* to describe exposure of these practices, because such exposure brings to light in a very concrete way the depth of violation of societal norms, values, and rules.

There is thus a huge role for the mass media and for think tanks in gathering and disseminating information. The media need to document the specific ills and outrages of the system and to try to demonstrate the way in which individual scandals are not discrete but part of a system of power and influence. Researchers in universities, think tanks, and foundations need to produce more analytical diagnoses of the system that interact with and put in a more systemic context the exposures of specific wrongdoing and unfairness. If this analytical work is to reach a mass audience in society, it must do so partly through the mass media, and this implies the need for working alliances between journalists and radio and television broadcasters on the one hand and scholars and policy analysts on the other. The latter group, particularly scholars—who are used to writing lengthy, arcane, and impenetrable prose for narrow audiences—must learn the art (orally and in writing) of expressing their research findings pointedly and concisely, in terms that ordinary citizens can understand and be moved by. Finally, the informational/intellectual/analytical realm of society must not only indict the current system but also propose a credible alternative. In the absence of specific and feasible proposals for
institutional reform, a political movement for reform cannot make real progress. Or worse still, it may bring down a corrupt system without having a viable alternative, or—as in the case of Israel’s ill-fated adoption of direct election of the prime minister—it may, through faulty and impulsive analysis, replace the current system with an even worse alternative. There is thus a big burden on scholars, intellectuals, and analysts to do their homework and to research alternative institutions (and actual reform experiences in other countries) with considerable care.

There is a value to transparency and broad consultation in this process of searching for institutional alternatives. The quest for meaningful political reform involves in large measure educating and persuading society. Part of that education can come through an open and highly visible examination of reform alternatives, in conferences, television programs, public dialogues, and a variety of other means. This also has the salutary effect of soliciting a broader base of input and thus facilitating the construction of a broader coalition for reform.

And that is the third major source of power: the breadth and diversity of the reform coalition.

Building Broad Coalitions for Reform

In addition to morality and policy logic, movements for fundamental political reform must mobilize several other forms of power. These include: 1) money, to organize, educate, recruit new members, and wage the campaign for public opinion in the mass media; 2) votes, both in parliament and (in order to elect or recruit supporters in parliament) at the polls in general
elections; 3) influence, in the form of strategically placed elites from a number of different sectors of society; and 4) sheer numbers, in terms of demonstrators, activists, donors, and so on.

Mobilizing all these various forms of power against the formidable, institutionalized power of an entrenched establishment requires very broad coalitions. The core of the coalition may consist of one or more specialized movement organizations with the specific aim of constitutional or institutional reform. These organizations may begin as temporary “cause” organizations but gradually become institutionalized into permanent good governance/clean politics organizations, such as the American group, Common Cause (which formed during the Watergate scandals in the United States to clean up abuses of money in American politics). Whether or not there are such specialized organizations at the core, many other types of groups must be drawn in. Thus the coalition may include the following elements:

1. *Good government NGO’s and foundations* whose explicit purpose is to campaign for transparency, accountability, civic participation, human rights, and the deepening of democracy. I call these groups *civic organizations* because their commitment is to the improvement of the overall political system rather than to the advancement of any particular sectoral interest.

2. *Other issue-oriented “movement” NGOs*: for the environment, women’s rights, consumer protection, peace, social justice, minority rights, and so on.

3. *Traditional sectoral interest groups*: business, labor, students, lawyers, doctors, and other professional organizations.
4. *Religious institutions, organizations, and thinkers.*

5. *Cultural organizations* at the national, municipal, and community level.

6. *Informational and educational organizations,* particularly think tanks and foundations, but universities can play an important role. And finally, even:


Analytically, there are several key features of the broad coalition for reform. First, it must draw from diverse functional, ideological, and regional segments of society, even though it cannot by definition be comprehensive in its coverage, since it is challenging the established system and its key beneficiaries. Second, it must build upon existing social networks and organizations, and thus cut across and unify many interests that would contend against one another on other issues. This gives the movement for reform some flavor of a “cause” or moral crusade, in that it unifies so many groups that are otherwise frequently opposed. Third, even if it is unified into a single (movement) peak organization, inevitably it will consist of many overlapping and not entirely coordinated efforts and voices. A movement as broad as this must be effectively coordinated, but it cannot pretend to speak monolithically with a single voice if it wishes to remain democratic. And if it does not remain democratic, it contradicts the purpose it claims to pursue.¹³

By now some shrewd readers may feel this description has a familiar ring to it. This is the type of broad front that often comes together to challenge an authoritarian regime and press for a transition to democratic rule. And the formation of a movement for democratic political reform
of an ossified system of privilege may evoke the kind of extraordinary political moment of transition when (civil) society awakens from its long political slumber and challenges established assumptions. “Usually, artists and intellectuals are the first to” make this challenge to the existing order and to puncture the myth of inevitability. Then a welter of more organized social forces become active in a “popular upsurge” that is temporary but intense. The campaign for political reform may need to become more protracted and institutionalized, but its success usually emerges from an exceptional moment of crisis in the old order, often generated by scandal and sometimes by a moral breakthrough of rhetoric or organization on the part of the forces of change.

**Linking Civil and Political Society**

It is not enough for civil society actors to forge a common cause among themselves, across their otherwise diverse interests. They must also link up with sympathetic (or even opportunistic) forces in the state and the party system. In the end, institutional reforms must be enacted by parliament, if not by some special constitutional reform process that (in most countries) parliament must call or at least consent to. Fundamental change in a country’s political institutions cannot be accomplished without some involvement of politicians from political parties (new or old), and in any case, it will not be effective or sustainable unless it is embraced by or gives rise to effective and legitimate party politicians. There has been for too long a tendency in both academic analysis and civil society discourse to exalt civil society actors as noble and civic while dismissing political parties and politicians completely as self-serving and corrupt. Yet many civil society organizations are complicit in the old order, and
quite possibly unable to break free of it. And many politicians may be ready to embrace reform. In a democracy, lasting political reform cannot come without the cooperation of parties and politicians. Civil society advocates of reform must therefore be prepared to forge alliances with sympathetic parties and political leaders, or else to form their own alternative parties for this purpose. Further, they must be prepared to cooperate with sympathetic figures in government, both party politicians and state bureaucrats, in the protracted process of transforming the poetry of civic mobilization into the detailed prose of institutional transformation. Civil society activists who refuse to dirty their hands by working with politicians and government officials for institutional change are destined to fall short of their goals.

**Felicitous Byproducts**

Even if there is a breakthrough of constitutional reform, institutions will take time to adapt, and civil society must remain vigilant in the quest for lasting political change. In mobilizing for a more democratic political system, however, civic organizations will generate some felicitous byproducts for democracy. Their activism may not only bring a better, more open, transparent, fair and democratic system of government, it may also enhance social capital and create “networks of working relations between citizens and their governments even as those same citizens express their dismay to survey researchers.”¹⁵ Indeed, it is even possible to speculate that if mobilized citizens succeed in reforming corrupt and opaque systems of political competition, interest mediation, and policy making, they may even find themselves a good deal less disaffected with the way their democracies work.


5 Chu, Diamond, and Shin, Table 5.

6 For a discussion of this linkage, see Larry Diamond, Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), chapter 5.


13 One type of model of a civic organization for democratic reform is Korea’s Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice. It was founded in 1989 by 500 academics, lawyers, and church activists and has since grown to a national federated organization with over 15,000 dues-paying members and an agenda that has already achieved some significant reforms promoting transparency in banking transactions and greater fairness in taxation. See Sunhyuk Kim, “Civic Mobilization for Democratic Reform,” in Larry Diamond and Doh Chull Shin, eds., Institutional Reform and Democratic Consolidation in Korea (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000): 279-304.
