

# **Shrinking Civic Space in Pakistan: Response and Strategies of the Civil Society**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses the issue of shrinking civic space in Pakistan. The study presents civil society activists' responses on this issue, highlights their perception, present and future strategies to address this issue, and their effectiveness, as such, as well. Pakistan presents a unique case due to its involvement in the 'war on terror' and the consequences being faced by both the state and society at large. Present shrinking of civil society action is directly linked with it. In an attempt to grapple with the problems emerging from 'war on terror', the overgrown state is encroaching upon citizens' space, thus denying the civil society to play its due role which can provide safety for the state as well. The preferred strategies of the NGOs include lobbying with parliamentarians and mobilizing the citizenry about the situation.

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## **Introduction**

Pakistan was envisaged as a democratic state. The founding fathers made it clear that the citizens would be allowed full fundamental rights following the secular principles. Such a state has to allow civil society as an indispensable sector. This is indeed a sphere in which citizen get together to launch organized activities for common needs and objectives ranging from self-help, welfare, education, health, to solve community problems, provide leisure facilities, upgrade local environment, and so on. 'The sum of this associational life has been called 'civil society'.<sup>1</sup> The civil society organisations (CSOs) included: human rights organisations, coalitions for the rights of women and children, trade unions, associations of professionals, social movements and public institutions.<sup>2</sup> Civil society provides space for discussing issues, voicing concerns, trying out solutions, and experimenting in social engineering.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Beetham, *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-first Century: A Guide to Good Practice* (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2006), p. 36

<sup>2</sup> These are civil society actors recognized by the UN. I.A. Rehman, 'Space for Civil Society', *Dawn*, 8 October 2015.

It helps people creating an environment of experiencing democracy by devising their own policies and implementing them through programs. It enhances democratic quality of the government by making it more accountable and responsive to citizens, especially when the democratic governments ignore or violate citizens' fundamental rights. Moreover, citizens add to the wider public sphere knowledge, skills and attitudes developed in their own groups and associations.<sup>3</sup> With such benefits in view, a society should create more and more space for its citizens sector to add to its quality of democracy, enrich the democratic participation and so improve overall quality of citizenry and citizen-state relations.

The natural growth of civil society in Pakistan has not been allowed in any regime, rather thwarted persistently. In fact the 'strategic needs' of the citizens, are not considered their right and CSOs working for it were attacked especially whenever the state itself felt weak or in crisis. In Pakistan, powerful domestic and external elements have deliberately and blatantly been intruding into the citizens' sphere to cut down their rights and activities in the domain of civil society. This issue of the survival of civil society is discussed in the following section in the backdrop of a study conducted through interviews with CSO members.

### **Civil society in Pakistan—evolution, nature and dynamics**

The Constitution of Pakistan grants freedom of association vide its Article 17, which is further endorsed by the Article 20 (1, 2) of UDHR, and ILO Conventions (Article 2 of 1987, Article 1 of 1998). But the de-facto situation is that the state and civil society are conceived to be opposite and against each other,<sup>4</sup> due to a centrist mindset of the ruling elite from the very beginning. Pakistan has also been elected a member of the UN Human Rights Council, which obliges Pakistani government to ensure high standards of human rights in domestic sphere as well.

Historically, the minuscule civil society inherited by Pakistan at its birth 70 years ago, consisted mainly of welfare organisations, trade unions, student unions and few peasant organisations. Women's uplift was added noticeably after 1948. The sector kept on expanding till the 1980s which proved to be its boom period. Then main priorities of NGOs were: welfare / rehabilitation, development/service delivery, and advocacy. The government, owing to its own shortcomings in providing basic needs to all the people, allowed NGOs to receive funds from local and international donors. The sector's growing involvement in advocacy

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<sup>3</sup> D. Beetham, *op.cit.*, p.36.

<sup>4</sup> S. Akbar Zaidi, *Military, Civil Society and Democratization in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard, 2011), p. 192.

and right-based activities invited disapproval of the government, as the ruling factions, comprising landed elites, few industrial families, and small faction of middle class professionals along with religious leaders, could not reconcile with the idea of people being empowered to solve their own issues and daring to put the government to question about its responsibilities to the needy sections. The NGOs movement created its own leaders from common people, and they, with indigenous approach to problem-solving, gradually entered the local bodies system. In the 1990s, the government attempted to control the NGOs through a bill by binding them to submit their records, performance and funding sources. It was though needed in the context of 'paper NGOs' who existed only in records but they were suspected to collect funds in people's name and misuse it with impunity. Another reason was NGOs getting funds from the foreign donors directly and not being accounted for it properly. In short, the conflict of interest between NGOs and the government was largely of control and accountability; both sides having their own reasons to assert their respective positions.

Corruption, a boundless ailment, spreads from one domain of governance to another if not checked at the right time. After the 1970s, in particular, growing corruption in the system of governance in Pakistan made inroads into the NGO sector as well, thus inviting general criticism and more control on NGOs by the government. The huge inflow of foreign funding in the decades of 1980s and 1990s, tempted many fortune seekers as well to get the fund and use it for personal benefits, such as getting big offices, vehicles, foreign trips and meetings in luxury hotels. Therefore, NGOs earned bad name for 'wasting funds got in the name of deserving people'. Such stories and evaluation of this funding forced the donors to employ strict checks and monitoring to ensure effective utilization. The government, at this stage came up with the conditions that no NGO will get funds directly from foreign agencies but only through the government channels. Since the government machinery was already infested with corruption, more corruption was thus ensured along with more control on the NGO sector.

Another dimension of the restrictions' of the civil society and NGOs, in particular, emerged with the rise of terrorism in the region. The starting point was Soviet invasion in Afghanistan (1979), then the involvement of Pakistan, Islamic world and the US to oust Russia. The Afghan refugees came in huge number (about 3 million) to Pakistan and stayed here for over three decades. They still live in substantial number in camps in border areas. Their presence in Pakistan has cast long shadows on economy, culture, urban population, crimes and drugs networks, and above all on the growth of militancy and terrorism in the

country. The prolonged process of Afghan war against Soviet forces, and its aftermath, caused huge involvement and influence on the state and society of Pakistan as well. Pakistan has received in return drone attacks, perpetual threats of terrorism, deep-rooted Talibanization of the society, widespread weaponisation and killing of its over 50,000 civilians and security personnel in terror attacks or combat.

Pakistani bid to facilitate the US to curb communism and terrorism in Afghanistan had now turned from an adventure to a big trouble. Now the US is pushing Pakistan to 'do more' for curbing terrorists' safe havens in Pakistan and Pakistan in turn explains that it had suffered too much for the US-led 'war on terror', and now the state in Pakistan is facing serious problems of militancy and insurgency in certain areas. The financial cost is very high, and weaponisation has turned the whole society into a horror theatre.

The civil society at large has been continuously responding to the developments connected to the Soviet invasion, Pakistani involvement, and then the long trail of terrorism in the region and the country. Gradually, since the late 2000s, the civil society has shown signs of burgeoning and getting involved in emerging strategic issues. Some daring examples can be quoted from the Lawyers' movement to restore Justice Iftikhar Chaudhari, and the peasant organisations, who have also asserted when their livelihood rights were endangered. The labour and trade unions have been highly restricted through legal means and tactics to keep the labourers in closed circle and not letting them join any trade union or labour movement; unsurprisingly such measures have successfully depoliticized the labourers. An active civil society promotes and protects democratic tendencies. Efforts of the CSOs, in general and the NGOs, in particular, to gain power in the society were not accepted by the traditional elite (*wadera, chaudhari, khan or sardar*). Moreover, the local militant outfits also identified CSOs as their rival in power tussle, thus they ensued outright opposition and targeting of CSO workers.

The mega development projects of the government involve huge funding, regulations, control mechanism as well as financial gains after completion. The construction, plan and planning of the mega projects, and their environmental impact and gains to various sections of the society are mostly not known to public despite the laws about right to information being in place. In view of this situation a number of networks of civil society organisations started to demand from the government especially on special occasions like the human rights day (10 December 2016), to defend the human rights defenders, and actors who defend public interests using democratic means. They highlighted

civil society's role against dictatorship and for all pro-rights legislations in national and provincial assemblies. They also asked the government to take civil society as a partner in realizing citizens' rights, and also urged to engage CSOs in framing policies and laws concerning people.<sup>5</sup>

The right to form labour/trade unions, granted since the pre-colonial times, is so much curtailed that those who want to form union face severe opposition. There are a few big labour organisations, but no ideological clusters rather one ideological group is divided within. The autocratic political system which disturbs the democratic process also crushes labour rights. The majority of labour is totally ignorant of its rights, so is misled by few opportunists.<sup>6</sup> The latest trends of hiring through contracts, measures for ensuring industrial peace, and global economic linkages, discourage any form of unions. Moreover, right to assembly is thwarted by imposing section 144, even peaceful demonstrations are not allowed; they are baton-charged or dispersed with brutal means including shooting. The labour movement has a large number of such victims, killed with impunity.<sup>7</sup>

The observation or apprehension about the shrinking of civic activity has been alluded to by Beetham,<sup>8</sup> indicating obvious broad retreat from public life, privatization of leisure activities and individual consumerism, especially among the young generation, but the surveys in UK and USA have not forcefully endorsed this assertion. With rise in awareness of citizen's rights, any cut on the role and significance of civil society seems very unlikely.

In the case of Pakistan, it has been confirmed by research that NGOs have successfully contributed to awareness and realization of rights among women, in particular, and masses, in general, in the last four decades.<sup>9</sup> The younger generation in Pakistan, as well, is seen engaged in political activities, community development, provision of basic and higher needs and social service. It is a general consensus that

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<sup>5</sup> *The News* (daily), <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/171146-Civil-society-voices-concern-over-shrinking-civic-space>, accessed 1/9/2017. The same point of view was re-confirmed during the survey conducted for this study with the sample respondents also listed in the news report.

<sup>6</sup> For evolution and issues of trade unions see, Riffat Hussain, *Pakistan ki Trade Union Tehreek ka Ijmali Jaiza* (Karachi: PILER, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> D. Beetham, *op.cit.*, p.37.

<sup>9</sup> Anwar Shaheen, 'Changing Cultural Patterns in Pakistan: With Reference to the Role and Perceptions of the Non-Governmental Organisations in Pakistan: 1972-2006', PhD dissertation (Unpublished), Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, 2010.

now in the information age, it is difficult to curtail people's participation in the political affairs, since they have access to multiple sources of information and old methods of authoritarian regimes cannot be applied ruthlessly to control them.

### **Shrinking of civic space is Pakistan**

New guidelines for registration with the Ministry of Interior were announced in November 2013. The implementation resulted in expulsion orders to at least nine INGOs in November 2015<sup>10</sup> and asking further 30 INGOs in December 2017 to be prepared for leaving in case they fail to comply for registration under the new law.<sup>11</sup> The new procedure particularly required providing details about sources of funding. Pakistan Humanitarian Forum (PHF) has responded to the issues emerging from the new registration policy and regulation mechanism for the INGOs. PHF has taken the position that NGOs and INGOs have been active to provide basic needs as well as to realize the human rights of the people.<sup>12</sup> It, accepting the full legitimate control of the government, has tried to negotiate on the issues with the Ministry of Interior and expressed the intention to continue collaboration with the government for the ultimate cause of uplift of the masses in need.<sup>13</sup> The banned INGOs approached the interior minister for appeal, and they were allowed in early January 2018 to continue working till their appeals were finally decided. This decision was moved by the large scale condemnation and keeping in view the volume of contribution of these organisations.<sup>14</sup> The crackdown

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<sup>10</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/986093/nine-ingos-refused-registration/>, accessed 5 April 2018.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/15d38124-de54-11e7-a8a4-0a1e63a52f9c>, accessed 5 April 2018.

<sup>12</sup> For instance see: 'Pakistan Humanitarian Forum, which represents scores of foreign aid groups, says their work directly benefits about 29 million people in Pakistan. Foreign-aid groups contributed some \$285 million in funding for development and emergency relief in 2016, and employ over 5,000 local staff, it said. The Open Society Foundations first started working in Pakistan in 2005, providing \$3 million of emergency relief for victims of a devastating earthquake. It provided another \$6mn in emergency funds after severe flooding in 2010'. Available at: <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/12/15/govt-orders-21-international-ngos-to-wrap-up-operations-in-pakistan/>, accessed 5 April 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Pakistan Humanitarian Forum, press release, 11 December 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/ministry-interior-issues-rejection-letters-international-non-governmental>, accessed 1 April 2018.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1382051>, accessed 2 February 2018

on NGOs, however, has confirmed a definite trend of shrinking of civic space in Pakistan, perceived as a threat to democratic future of the country.

Moreover, certain agents have been active to target the human rights defenders of Pakistan, through using the digital media. A report by Amnesty International (AI) revealed in May 2018 that through fake online identities and fake profiles on the social media, the activists have been spied upon and victimized through tactics which clearly come under cyber-crimes regulations. The investigation report, quoting real examples has shown that through clever means not only activists' accounts have been hacked, computers and mobile phones are infected and their physical security is threatened, so an AI official expressed: 'It is already extremely dangerous to be a human rights defender in Pakistan and it is alarming to see how attacks on their work are moving online'.<sup>15</sup> The report also mentions that such attacks are part of a broader assault on civil society, and the attackers belong to a group based in Pakistan. It clearly establishes that the government has failed in protecting the defenders who defend others from attacks.

In this backdrop, one can imagine that both local and international NGOs have been facing continuous suspicion from the government about real intentions of the NGOs' work, which is expected to be directed against the security of the state. The sensitivity of the matter, of course, demands careful and sincere efforts on the part of all stakeholders to deal with the issue in question. It is a matter of betterment of millions of people and inflow of foreign relief worth hundreds of millions of dollars on one hand and security on the other.

## **Methodology**

A survey was conducted with 16 top leaders and activists of renowned civil society organisations, mostly working in Sindh province, to know their perception about shrinking of civic space in Pakistan and their response as to their strategies. The participants belonged to 16 organisations but had connection with many other CSOs and networks hence represented a broader cross-section of viewpoints. Due to their more concentration or availability in Sindh province, it can be rightfully assumed that the survey reflects the views of civil society of Sindh in

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<sup>15</sup> With reference to statement of Sherif Elsayed-Ali, Director of Global Issues at Amnesty International. For detail see press release at: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/pakistan-investigation-uncovers-sinister-hacking-campaign-targeting-activists>, accessed 15 May 2018.

particular. The foremost reason for this has been the researcher's association with the University of Karachi, Sindh. The sample included the following NGOs:

1. *Amnesty International (Karachi office)*: It is active internationally and monitors closely the human rights situation in Pakistan as well.
2. *Aurat Foundation*: It is the leading national NGO, active for women's rights, having regional offices throughout the country. Since 1986, it has been engaged in information service, publication, advocacy, lobbying, public awareness campaigns, and activism for women's rights.<sup>16</sup>
3. *Badal Do: Literally meaning 'change'*: It is a consortium of seven partner NGOs including: AzCorp Entertainment, Society for International Education (SIE), Pak-American Cultural Centre (PACC), Teachers' Resource Centre (TRC), Children's Museum for Peace and Human Rights (CMPHR), the School of Writing (TSW), and Mind Map Communications (MMC).<sup>17</sup> Its approach is to train teachers to inculcate inclusive learning by respecting plurality, and promoting peace, tolerance and good civic sense.
4. *Centre for Peace and Civil Society (CPCS)*: A think tank, based in Hyderabad, active for strengthening civil society and promoting democracy.<sup>18</sup>
5. *Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)*: A leading NGO at the national level, having regional offices, correspondents and investigation teams to see into the reported violations of human rights. It has been publishing an annual detailed report namely: *State of Human Rights in Pakistan*, since 1991, along with monthly newsletters and investigation reports periodically.
6. *Legal Aid Society*: Working under the headship of former judge of Supreme Court of Pakistan (comprising senior judges, lawyers and social workers) to provide legal aid to underserved, marginalized, uninformed and disempowered segments of the society to increase their access to justice. It has a focus on Sindh province, with offices in Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur, Ghotki, and Larkana.
7. *Pakistan Fisher Folk Forum*: It is rather a social movement having over 70,000 members, 35 per cent being women, from all over

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<sup>16</sup> For details: <https://www.af.org.pk/>

<sup>17</sup> Details available at: <https://www.facebook.com/badaldo.pk/>, and <http://www.badaldo.net/>

<sup>18</sup> For introduction see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CPCS>, and <http://www.cpcs.org/pk/home/>



- Pakistan. It is active for promoting economic, cultural and political rights of fishing and peasant communities since 1998. Though based in Karachi, it has been active for environmental protection, sustainable development, emergency response and climate change.<sup>19</sup>
8. *Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER)*: It has been active nation-wide since 1982, for mobilizing and organizing the workers and communities to procure the full range of labour rights including decent living in formal and informal sectors. It has a strong focus on training, research, advocacy and networking with national and regional civil society organizations. It has its head office in Karachi and branch office in Lahore, and involves workers from all over Pakistan.<sup>20</sup>
  9. *Press Club* (Karachi).
  10. *Panah*: A shelter home for women in Karachi, providing a full range of support service to women in distress, especially those thrown out by their families.<sup>21</sup>
  11. *South Asia Partnership-Pakistan*: The only South Asian level NGO active in Pakistan since 1987, having the central office in Pakistan at Lahore. It is working through regional offices in all the four provinces. It works with marginalized sections to ensure <sup>22</sup>their empowerment for equality, peaceful coexistence, democracy, good governance, justice and human dignity.
  12. *Urban Resource Centre*:<sup>23</sup> Working to promote research and understanding about the urban society of Pakistan in terms of physical infrastructure, transport, ecology, politics, management, economics and sociology. It is more engaged in research and documentation on the planning issues and urban problems.<sup>24</sup>
  13. *Pakistan Youth Movement*: A relatively young organization, it has been active for mobilizing and organizing the youth of Pakistan for the noble cause of development and uplift of the nation.<sup>25</sup>
  14. *Agriculture General Workers Union (Hyderabad)*: Is active for peasants' rights as well as of all the marginalized sections and works in collaboration with other CSOs.

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<sup>19</sup> For details see its website: <http://pff.org.pk>

<sup>20</sup> Details about PILER are available at its home site: <http://piler.org.pk/>

<sup>21</sup> For details see: <http://panahshelter.org>

<sup>22</sup> Details available at: [sappk.org](http://sappk.org)

<sup>23</sup> Details at: [www.urckarachi.org/index.html](http://www.urckarachi.org/index.html), and <https://www.facebook.com/URCKHI/>

<sup>24</sup> For details see: <http://www.urckarachi.org/index.html>

<sup>25</sup> For details: <https://www.facebook.com/PakistanYouthMovement/>

15. *Sindh Sugar Trade Union Federation*: Is active in Sindh for sugar mill workers.
16. *Baldia Workers Union (Nawabshah)*: Is active for municipal workers of Nawabshah, Sindh.

Sampling was made through judgmental method, to ensure inclusion of variety of civil society organisations in terms of scale and field of operation. It is clear from the above introduction of the NGOs that those included are regional, national, provincial, and local NGOs, both from urban and rural areas of Sindh, in particular, and Pakistan, at large. Their focus, approaches, and mode of work is highly diverse, yet they all work as members of a civil society, which has been strictly monitored and checked for its awareness raising, empowering and uplift activities. Education, training and research are also taken up by some of these organisations. They all work with grass-roots people and gain firsthand experience of their respective communities hence deserve to be selected as genuine civil society organisations.

The interviews were conducted in person and through telephone. Material produced and provided by sample CSOs was quite useful. The questions focused on three major dimensions: manifestation of shrinkage, ways of restricting the civic space, factors causing shrinking, impact and effectiveness of CSOs' action, and future strategies for dealing with the emerging challenges. The following sections present the findings of this survey.

## Findings

### Manifestation of shrinkage: Issuing of restrictive legislations

In 2015, the authorities issued 64 anti-civil society laws, according to a CIVICUS report. In the name of threat to security four types of orders were issued:<sup>26</sup>

- i. *Getting NOC*: Since 2012, various NGOs were informed to get Non-Objection Certificates (NOCs) for their working and planned activities. The law is stifling as it requires submitting all old record and employees' information. Under this law, many NGOs' licenses were cancelled.
- ii. *Re-registration*: Already most of the CSOs/NGOs/CBOs are registered under some law but they were ordered to re-register. The process requires many types of police verifications/tax documents, and declaration on sources of fund, etc. It was commented by a survey participant that this process has exhausted the NGOs. Later

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<sup>26</sup> Details available in: *State of Human Rights in 2016* (Lahore: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2017), pp. 129-36.

- on, the international NGOs were allowed relaxation but the local NGOs are still under this law. NGOs are also made liable to present their registration with the Economic Affairs Division before getting fund from the UN group of agencies (UNDP, UNICEF etc.).
- iii. *Strict registration laws*: A leader of PILER reported that NGOs and CSOs are taken as soft targets by the establishment whenever it wants to tighten its clutches on the society. The law of re-registration is very excruciating in that getting registration for the first time is also very difficult, what to talk of second time. PILER itself got registered as a non-profit organisation under the Securities and Exchange Companies of Pakistan. The 2017 legislation related to the same registration came even more restrictive, such as not allowing spending more than 20 per cent on salaries.
  - iv. *New registration*: The process is made very difficult.

## 2. Ways of restricting civic space

- i. *Interference in civil society activities*: This is now practiced openly and boldly. NGOs activities are questioned too much. Their process is disrupted, investigators just walk into the programs, or dismiss preparation of events. Freedom of expression is also curtailed. In 2016, seven journalists were killed, 15 were attacked, while nine media houses were attacked.<sup>27</sup> Well-known human rights defenders have been attacked since 2012.
- ii. *Targeted killing/terrorist activities*: Many civil society groups have been added to the hit list. For instance, 70 lawyers were killed in an attack on Balochistan Bar on 8 August 2016.
- iii. *Abduction and enforced disappearances*: Earlier the stories of missing persons from Balochistan revealed highhandedness of the unidentified abductors. Recently wave of disappearing persons from the Sindh province has alarmed the human rights circles. Such disappearances are still unresolved and people campaigning for them in Sindh and Punjab have now become victims.<sup>28</sup>
- iv. *Intimidation of women workers*: Female workers of NGOs especially in remote areas are intimidated by intelligence agencies, and their working outside home is condemned. Expected threats to

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<sup>27</sup> South Asia Partnership-Pakistan, *Shrinking Civic Spaces in Asia, Status Report on Pakistan*, Lahore, August 2017, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> <http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/time-to-rid-pakistan-of-disappearances-is-now-hrcp/>

women's life, property, families, and jobs force them to retreat. Activist women in Pakistan can rarely operate without a network of social backing.

- v. *Withdrawal/drying up of funding*: The shrinking of financial support from institutional, bilateral and international donors has a direct bearing upon space for activism. The advocacy organisations are not considered suitable recipient for philanthropic funding. With rising wave of religious extremism the faith-based organisations now get lion's share in charitable giving. Corruption stories of NGOs are also damaging for their action.

### 3. Factors causing shrinking

- i. *State-civil society relations*: State, no doubt, constitutes an overarching and very powerful set of institutions, whereas civil society has only recognized its potential recently especially in the postcolonial countries, so it is in the process of growth and experimenting, whereas organs of the state have been long established as legitimate movers and shakers of the society. It is basically the ruling elite which is against the role of civil society's democratic pursuit, and has decided to curtail it. This policy would surely lead to even worse consequences for both state and society, but the establishment and authorities in Pakistan are not likely to revise their perceptions. Denying basic human rights, civil liberties and a space for voluntary action or even self-help to solve civic problems is definitely curtailment of citizens' space and an onslaught on their human dignity. The right to protection of life is guaranteed by the constitution, but it is violated in the name of law and order. To curb terrorism has made authorities indulge in actions which amount to 'state terrorism'. The cumulative impact of such actions is an 'overgrown' state, encroaching upon the citizens' space. It must be kept in view that the NGO process has shown noticeable achievements in providing awareness and rights. The stakeholders thus disturbed by NGOs' strategic role have been bashing them. These include government functionaries, feudal leaders, religious factions, socially conservative sections apprehensive of or unable to cope with the pace of modernization, and patriarchal forces joining hands with oppressive elements.<sup>29</sup>
- ii. *Peace initiatives*: Peace, harmony, tolerance, inclusivity and dialogue are core values of civil society action. But the security establishment in Pakistan has very often attacked those who

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<sup>29</sup> Anwar Shaheen, *op.cit.*

advocate peace. They can be government, NGOs, or any other actor. The PILER leader stated: ‘We have always been asked very critically about our activities regarding peace in the region, and our stand for normalizing relations with India, whereas this is endorsed by many other groups as well.’ It has been irony that the advocates of peace are dealt with iron-hand. The media campaign ‘*Amn ki Aasha*’ (hope for peace) has been stopped, allowing ever-growing militarism, weaponisation, and intolerance at the general level. Some more glaring examples have been gang wars in Karachi, and a sort of insurgency in Balochistan, now a backward province, but hoped to reap huge benefits from China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), only if peace prevails.

- iii. *Reasons specific to Pakistan:* The situation of Pakistan regarding shrinking of civic space is different from many other third world countries rather it is unique, as is argued by survey participants. The reasons spring basically from Pakistan’s position due to war on terror, her severed relations with neighbours, and a strong civil-military bureaucracy nexus never accepting democracy as a value or human right. Participants generally agreed that the start of CPEC project has triggered curb on civil society more prominently, because CPEC security is in the hands of the military. For instance, in southern Sindh, the Thar region coal mining has now started, but any voice advocating citizens’ rights or environmental issues are silenced and protesters are abducted, showing that an economic project involving the federal and provincial governments of Pakistan and the Chinese government has now achieved strategic significance. As CPEC is expanding, it would out rightly encroach more on the civic space.

Pakistani state is turned into a security state, which keeps security concerns above every other considerations defying the national and international laws. The government at times refuses to recognize the worth of the civil society, which can be exploited for the betterment of citizens and democracy.

#### **4. Impact and strategies**

- i. *Wrapping up of NGOs:* The leading human rights organisations, HRCF and Aurat Foundation, due to shrinking of sources have cut down their staff or publication activities. A number of HRCF active human rights defenders, have been killed or attacked, so it is now operating at a shrunken scale. As major component of civil society, NGOs started making their presence felt in the 1980s. Then the international environment was conducive for

- NGOs growth, but now it is expressed by the participants that time has come to wind up the NGOs business, as they had emerged under certain historical conditions and their utility is perhaps no more certain. It is, however, expected that only the advocacy NGOs would be the first target of this onslaught, as they disturb the desired power equation of state and society. One can also anticipate that the whole NGO sector would most probably not disappear, rather its activist component might be transformed, or perhaps grow into some other form.
- ii. *Seeking court verdicts:* Three partner NGOs of South Asia Partnership (SAP), working in southern Punjab were ordered to close down. SAP went to the Punjab High Court and got restoration against the high-handedness. Some more NGOs in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were also targeted; they approached their High Courts and got their constitutional rights restored. Such organisations had a strong political backing, but ordinary NGOs cannot retaliate to state pressures.
  - iii. *Networking:* A network namely Sindh Civil Society Forum including 13 members, was set up in September 2013, to boost development in Sindh.<sup>30</sup> It works under the leadership of an NGO, SAWFCO. Pakistan Civil Society Forum (PCSF) was launched in Islamabad in January 2016 to regain civic space. Its leader I.A. Rehman declared: ‘we will not allow the government to turn enabling laws into restrictive laws.’ Another network is operating as Sindh Human Rights Defenders, whose need was established by the abduction of 82 civil society activists in Sindh only in August 2017. The issue was raised from this platform, as it is easier to silence individual voices but not a forum voice.
  - iv. *Lobbying with politicians:* Recently the Pakistan Civil Society Forum delegation met the new interior minister to apprise him of the critical issues faced by CSOs. The minister himself has worked with the civil society, so the Forum is pinning hope on him.
  - v. *Campaign in media:* The prominent writers of the civil society have been writing in print and electronic media. Civil society’s effort is on to keep the issue alive; CSOs’ version being heard, and also to seek improvement.

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<sup>30</sup> For details see: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/archive/print/453827-sindh-civil-society-forum-formed-to-take-up-development-issues-with-government>

- vi. *Demonstrations*: This is adopted for ensuring peasants' and labour rights and highlighting atrocities done to them in Sindh province.
- vii. *Conferences, seminars, consultations, publications*: Such activities have continued to establish more contacts with people to gain more strength and momentum for asserting the civil society's viewpoint.

## 5. Effectiveness of CSOs' action

The survey results and participants' perception indicated that the civil society is still in shock but has made some moves which are not sufficient. It also realizes that more vigorous actions are needed. As the strong NGOs have been circumscribed, an effective reaction to regain space is yet to come.

## 6. Issues of sustaining human rights movement

With the government's resolve in pushing the CSOs to the wall, and also denying the anti-democratic implications of such moves, the ideal of civilized governance is demolished and the state has imperiled its own future.<sup>31</sup> Here one thing is noteworthy that it is not just the civic space but also the very basic rights of safety of life, property and honour which are to be ensured by the state. If a lawyer pleading a case of an accused under blasphemy law, is threatened in open court and then murdered in his office, or an activist is target killed for refuting religious extremism, or opposing nuclear power plants in the areas,<sup>32</sup> the civil society takes it very conscientiously as its duty to raise voice.

## 7. Strategies for future

Lobbying with government authorities and political figures is the foremost strategy adopted to explain civil society's position and grievances. It was categorically stated by the participants that it is the democratic regime which allowed tightening of the civil society, so 'the parliamentarians are the ones, whom we vote for, and to whom we would turn for complain'. A veteran of civil society asserted: 'We should keep lobbying with the authorities because they have some misinformation and misconception about our work. We need to advocate our position to tell that we have no bad intention against the state, but we also want to highlight that all what the authorities are taking up so forcefully through

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<sup>31</sup> I.A. Rehman, 'Space for Civil Society', *Dawn*, 8 October 2015.

<sup>32</sup> For details see: <http://www.boell.de/en/2016/09/3/shrinking-civic-space-pakistan>

committing human rights abuses, are also not justified at all.’ He added: ‘We should keep holding conferences, seminars, and consultations and publishing material in this regard so that our presence is felt, our viewpoint is heard and our communication is effective’.

Another senior activist of PSCF reported: ‘We have held one meeting with the interior minister and are going for the second next month. We will ensure that a joint committee is made including representatives of the ministries, intelligence agencies and the civil society organisations, to frame procedure as to how the working of civil society should be monitored, and any independent unilateral action be avoided. The committee should work in democratic and transparent manner in restored civic space’. The second strategy of the PSCF is ‘to contact with people in large gatherings in different provinces and districts to inform them how much it is important for democracy and citizens’ constitutional rights that civil society is allowed working without any pressure and curtailment’.<sup>33</sup> This is how the civil society can enhance quality of democracy and the true senses of participation in the democratic process.

Another voice about the strategies goes far deeper, creating an atmosphere of tolerance and critical thinking, by suggesting that people do not accept the versions projected through media, pulpit, and schools uncritically. To let the coercive agenda succeed by a planned move by silencing CSOs has to be countered. It was clearly asserted by a respondent: ‘They got space consciously, and as much they proceeded the civil society retreated, and now we have to regain civic space consciously, because earlier we lost due to ignorance’.

A youth organisation representative emphasized lobbying closely and vigorously with the parliamentarians, as they are the real people making laws. We need to realize and ensure that people should discuss and deliberate upon the issues which are declared ‘banned, taboo and sensitive’, such as forced disappearances.

It was an overall agreement that the state, in its responsibility towards the international community, needs to review its position, since it has ratified a large number of international covenants. When this commitment is applied in legislation, overlapping of laws creates contradictions; one law allows certain things and another cancels the same. This situation ensures no benefit for the citizenry.

It was asserted that at present Pakistan has a ‘youth bulge’ in its population, who are facing a distortion due to depoliticisation, since the

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<sup>33</sup> A status report on the situation of Pakistan prepared by PSCF has also been launched in September 2017 in Lahore.



student unions are banned. They are taught treating politics as a taboo. Without having any critical analysis, this bulge cannot vote with genuine understanding of democratic process. A recent resolution in the Senate of Pakistan to allow students unions is welcomed with the assertion that momentum must be boosted till the objective is achieved.

Some more concerns of CSOs were regarding abolition of anti-labour laws, defending the human rights defenders, and avoiding misuse of anti-terror laws. Harassment among labour is proposed to be ended by more mobilization of people, social contacts and awareness of rights. Public figures and intelligentsia must play its role to promote political process and confidence among people.

### **Conclusion**

After the confirmation of the fact that space for any political, social, or cultural activity has been shrinking progressively, the activists have shown their perception of uncertainty and feeling of being alert to the impending situation. However, in this age of IT, social media and frequent global travel, it seems very unlikely that the stringent action would succeed in silencing the voices of civil society for long because the civil society, being the voice of the citizens, largely operates with the force of conviction and not for any outward benefit.