

Civil Society:

The concept of civil society refers to the collective body of non-governmental institutions, groups, and organizations that operate outside the framework of the state and contribute to the process of civilization (*civility*) within society. It is understood as an independent sphere that manages differences and conflicts through peaceful and rational means, and it is considered a vital channel of communication between the rulers and the ruled, or between leaders and the broader population.

The existence of an effective civil society presupposes the presence of the rule of law (*État de droit*), as the relationship between civil society and the state in liberal systems is generally understood as functional and complementary. Civil society represents:

- a force of pressure and protest
- a source of social and political demands
- a moral driving force
- a means of countering various forms of authoritarian rule

In this context, Michael Walzer argues that:

“Only a democratic state is capable of establishing a democratic civil society, and only a democratic civil society is capable of strengthening and supporting the democratic state.” This statement illustrates that a democratic system is inconceivable without an active and effective civil society.

Civil society and democratic transition: Civil society plays a pivotal role in the process of democratic transition through:

- opposing undemocratic authority
- leading civic mobilization
- promoting political reforms
- driving institutional change

Civil society is widely regarded as one of the most significant drivers of political change, as it can influence the structure of the political system through collective participation, the organization of protest movements, and the demand for democracy.

Larry Diamond argues that understanding the process of democratic transition requires a close examination of civil society, as well as an analysis of the internal contradictions and tensions that shape it. He therefore distinguishes between two main phases:

1. The transition phase (*phase of transition*)

At this stage, civil society is:

- unstable

- limited in its influence
- not yet decisive in shaping the balance of power within the state

It seeks to organize itself and build the capacity necessary to confront state authorities.

2. The consolidation phase (*phase of consolidation*)

At this stage, civil society acquires:

- an effective and influential role
- the capacity to hold authorities accountable
- stronger organizational capabilities
- a structural influence on public policies

It thus becomes a cornerstone in supporting and sustaining democracy.

Civil society is not merely a space for organizations; rather, it is a key actor in fostering political change, maintaining a balance between the state and society, and strengthening democratic governance. No democratic project can succeed or endure without a strong, autonomous, and active civil society.

- independent civil society institutions
- freedom of expression and association
- an open public sphere
- a state governed by the rule of law that respects rights and freedoms

Characteristics of civil society (the civil sphere)

The civil sphere comprises a wide range of institutions and intermediary bodies that express the will and interests of the people. It represents a form of social, political, and cultural organization that exists outside the authority of the state. Civil society organizations function as channels for expression, protest, advocacy, and oversight, thereby enabling society to challenge and hold authority accountable.

Civil society is characterized by several fundamental features:

1. Voluntary and optional association

Citizens join civil society organizations freely, without coercion or compulsion. This distinguishes them from state institutions, which are often based on legal obligation or mandatory membership. This voluntary nature reflects the principles of individual freedom and free choice.

2. Institutional diversity

Civil society encompasses a broad range of social, cultural, economic, and political institutions, including:

- productive institutions (professional and economic organizations)
- religious institutions
- educational institutions
- professional associations

- trade unions
- political parties
- cultural and social associations
- youth organizations
- cultural and sports clubs

This diversity enables civil society to represent different social groups and a wide range of interests.

3. Independence from the state

Civil society organizations enjoy relative autonomy from the political system in several respects:

a. Financial independence

They rely on independent sources of funding (membership fees, donations, project-based funding, etc.), which helps preserve their objectivity and credibility.

b. administrative independence

They operate through autonomous management structures and often elect their leadership through internal democratic procedures.

c. Organizational independence

They establish their own internal rules and bylaws without direct interference from public authorities.

Nevertheless, they operate within a legal framework that guarantees freedom of association while regulating their activities.

Civil society can therefore be understood as an autonomous, voluntary, and pluralistic sphere that enables citizens to express their interests, monitor those in power, and contribute to political and social change. It is a fundamental pillar in the construction and sustainability of any democratic system.