
UNIT 14 CIVIL SOCIETY AND ‘NEW’ SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Structure

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

Civil society refers to the association aspects of life in society. Larry Diamond defines civil society as the “realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, and autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.” It involves citizens “acting collectively in a public sphere” and encompasses a vast array of formal and informal organisations that are “economic, cultural, informational, interest-based, developmental, issue-oriented, and civic” and, importantly, which adhere to “pluralism and diversity.” Scholars have focused on different aspects of civil society. However, the gist of the concept of civil society lies in the peaceful coexistence of these multiple associations and by their collective capacity to simultaneously resist *subordination* to the state and demand *inclusion* into national political structures and processes.

Scholarly analyses have admitted that various types of grass-roots movements and non-governmental organisations did play an important role in building popular pressure on the authoritarian regimes and mobilised demanding directly and indirectly transition to a democratic rule. Associations of civil society are also deemed essential for the consolidation of democracy.

At the outset, let it be clearly known that democratic regimes can survive without a robust, or with a weak, civil society. The importance of an autonomous and a robust civil society lies in the assumption that it enhances the quality of democracy. Further, civil society can, in meaningful ways, shape and direct the process of economic liberalisation currently being witnessed all over Latin America. In other words, civil society is deemed necessary to enhance the prospects of civil liberties while, at the same time, it helps redress the problems of economic inequalities and social marginalisation that has become the fate of large segments of populations in the region.

14.2 AN OVERVIEW OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN LATIN AMERICA

Neither electoral democracy nor economic liberalism is new to Latin America. What, however, is new is the present conjunction of electoral democracy and market-oriented—or ‘neo-liberal’—economic policies. In the past, neither economic liberalism nor electoral democracy had together or separately worked to favour the emergence of an autonomous civil society.

In the 19th Century and well up to 1930s, Latin America had followed economic policies based on the principles of free trade. But it did not create favourable conditions for the emergence of a civil society. Productive sources remained in the hands of small elite of landowners and merchants—called oligarchy—and their collaborators viz. the foreign investors, church and the army and bureaucracy. Coercion and marginalisation was the fate of bulk of the population. Liberal ideas were modified and converted to suit the oligarchic domination. This was the age of ‘order and progress’—order for many and progress for the few. It is important to also note that such a system of ownership had created a highly repressive, authoritarian, narrowly-based centralised state that straddled both the economy and polity. Obviously, such a strong state had no place of autonomous associational activity.

Latin America underwent major social, economic and political transformations in the 1930s. New social classes particularly the middle and the industrial working classes laid a claim for political power. Import-substitution industrialisation (ISI) also began in place of primary product export policies. This was the period of populism and developmentalism. Enhanced political participation on the part of the popular classes however did not mean the beginning of any meaningful associational life. On the contrary, state domination over both economy and polity only increased further. The strategy of industrialisation and state role in the distribution of resources meant that greater state control over interest groups and political mobilisation. As a result, civil society, significantly in Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, remained by and large weak and subordinated to state policies and goals.

The aspect of civil society, namely its ability to resist subordination to the state and demanding inclusion in the decision-making process is very important. In the 1960s, major Latin American countries experienced military coups and even civilian regimes had adopted more coercive, anti-democratic, anti-distribution economic growth strategies. Guillermo O’Donnell has called these as Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism (BA) regimes. BA regimes were even more intent on creating a powerful all-encompassing state and on subordinating even excluding the civil society from the public political arena. Fernando Henrique Cardoso has argued that BA regimes were notable among others for separating the state from the civil society. BA regimes practiced exclusionary politics. They did even more forcibly exclude the civil society from the political process. So whatever little capacity civil society had during the era of populism was lost under the military rule.

The afore-mentioned overview suggests that civil society had always been weak in Latin America. Why it had been so? At least two important reasons can be cited for such a situation. First, the socio-economic structures of Latin America, especially the pattern of landholdings have, for centuries, shown extreme rigidities, maintaining to this day sharp economic inequalities and social hierarchies. Also, political elites have changed, so have expanded the electorate and the types of regime but the political pattern of elite domination has remained since the period of independence.

The second notable reason, as has been seen above, is the role of the state. For most of its history, state in Latin America has remained central and major issues of political inclusion-exclusion and economic growth-distribution have been worked out by and through the medium of the state. The introduction of market-oriented economic policies and reversal of the state position since the 1980s constitute a historic change in the role of the state. Nevertheless, what is noteworthy here is that there can be no evaluation of civil society without discussing the role of the state in Latin America.

When democratisation began in the late 1970s, it was notably a constricted civil society that came alive and expanded rapidly. BA regimes had disbanded most political activities but paradoxically allowed some associational activities. Most military regimes had begun towards the end of their tenure a process of political ‘liberalisation’ or political ‘opening’ (*abertura/apertura*). As political liberalisation began, it was essentially these seemingly non-political associations and movements that surged forward and began filling up the little political space those military regimes had permitted. It is to be noted that not all such associations and movements were ‘political’; often they shunned the ‘public’ and remained issue-specific and community-based. These were, for instances, soup kitchens, neighbourhood community organisations, ecclesiastical based communities (CEBs), and women’s organisations demanding to know the whereabouts of the ‘disappeared’. It were such grass-roots initiatives seeking innocuous goals that took advantage of the regime policies of political ‘liberalisation’ and expanded to indirectly articulate political demands of due process, accountability and transparency.

The way such movements expanded into the political arena and built pressures on the BA regimes is an important issue. For instance, under the authoritarian political system of Mexico, teachers, taking advantage of regime-sponsored political liberalisation, did succeed in building up a nation-wide movement whose objectives went beyond their immediate professional goals. Similarly, movements concerned with the problems of the ‘disappeared’ in Argentina and Chile, or the environmental movement—often lumped with the question of the rights of the indigenous population—for instance, in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico raised specific issues which were non-political but otherwise had deep political ramifications. These movements played a significant role in building popular pressure for political democratisation subsequently.

14.3 CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE ‘OLD’ AND THE ‘NEW’ SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements have long been part of the political landscape of Latin America. The *variety* of these movements, the *causes* they champion and the *means* they adopt are simply breathtaking. Movements of urban poor who squat on public lands in Lima, the ‘soup kitchens’ organised by the local communities to feed the poor and the destitute in La Paz, literacy campaigns in the *favelas* (shantytowns) of Rio de Janeiro, peasant guerilla movements in the Andean highlands of Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, liberation theologians organising ecclesiastical base communities in Brazil, Nicaragua, etc., urban guerillas in Uruguay and Argentina can all be classified as social movements.

In the past, social movements were considered as building blocks in the larger projects of revolutionary social transformation. These were deemed ‘pre-political’ elements, with the potential of becoming part of revolutionary political movements seeking some kind of revolutionary ‘socialist’ transformation. Such a view had gained ground in the era of socialism and in Latin America especially in the wake of the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Revolutionaries of all hues had valued social movements and considered them revolutionary because social movements admittedly imparted a new consciousness and practical participatory skills to their adherents. Both these qualities were deemed necessary for eventual political activism and mobilisation of the masses in the cause of social change. In short, both the political theorists and activists in Latin America had firmly put the social movements on the side of the ‘progressive’ causes.

Sometime in the decade of the 1980s, such a view began changing. Hopes for a wholesale social transformation of Latin America had receded for a host of reasons including the demise of socialist bloc, region-wide economic recession, and defeat of leftist guerilla movements, and initiation of democratisation process.

14.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ‘NEW’ SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

As the possibilities of wholesale social transformation receded, hopes have come to be pinned upon the localised movements. The wide range and variety of these movements are clubbed together under the heading of ‘social movements’, often ‘new social movements’ (NSMs). These are deemed as NSMs for they differ in some important respects from the ‘old’ social movements which were deemed building blocks of socialism. These NSMs have some definite new characteristics too.

In the first place, the range and variety of the NSMs is simply breathtaking, and not without controversies. As has been noted earlier, at one end, NSMs include neighbourhood based urban popular movements which organise to fight for housing and public services like electricity, potable water, public transport, and at a more developed stage, schools and clinics. Local self-help organisations, cooperative soup kitchens and the CEBs in which nuns, priests and lay Catholics organise among the poor to combine popular religious practices with the struggle for collective goods are also included in the NSMs. Human rights groups, environmental and indigenous peoples’ organisations, women’s groups, and popular cultural groups are also part of the NSMs. At the other end of the spectrum, not only ‘social’ but also class-based and political party-oriented organisations such as urban and rural-based ‘independent’ trade unions and ‘progressive’ political parties such as the Workers’ Party of Brazil are also covered under NSMs. Cross-border and international solidarity organisations such as advocacy groups, internet-exchange groups, the complex of non-governmental and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs/INGOs), micro-enterprises of every kind, some time the entire informal economy—which outstrips the formal economy in size in many parts of Latin America—are all included under the rubric of NSMs. NSMs therefore include very diverse kinds of movements. In sum, making any precise definition of NSMs is nearly impossible.

Secondly, the earlier view that social movements are building blocks of revolution and socialism has been, more or less, given up. Their localised nature of NSMs is emphasised upon and their non-political characteristics valued in providing social services and maintaining community life. NSMs need not necessarily be responses to some ‘progressive’ causes; today they also serve the needs of those who champion market-oriented economic policies. World Bank and other international financial institutions have expressed faith in the schemes of self-help or NGO-funded popular organisations as the principal promoters of ‘development with a human face’. State, in a liberalising economy, is giving up many of its responsibilities particularly in the field of education, health-care etc. Market-oriented reformers argue that such social services can be better provided by NGOs with efficiency and at low cost. Thus, and it may sound ironic, social movements are acclaimed by enthusiasts at the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum as an expression of popular resistance against the predatory neo-liberal economic policies; and also as a tool through which market-oriented economic policies can be made to work more efficiently. To elaborate

further, anything ‘popular’ need not necessarily be ‘progressive’. Far-right groups such as the Christian Right have enjoyed considerable success in organising at the grass-roots level in Latin America. Evangelicals are fundamentalist and reactionary but fit the label of ‘popular movement’. Similarly, many ‘popular movements’ can veer towards reaction when co-opted by the state or captured by demagogues and populists. These are the problems of the modern NSMs.

Thirdly, there is a general agreement that social movements emerge in civil society. But, some of the movements and associations of civil society could be highly uncivil. The concept of civil society itself is vague; and the conceptual problem gets compounded since there is no agreed definition of NSM either. Therefore, analysts label various movements as ‘civil’ or ‘uncivil’ depending upon their own political-ideological preferences. For example, ‘autonomous’ trade unions had emerged in the 1980s rebelling against the corporatist control mechanisms of the state and had paid a heavy political price for their independence. They are a part of civil society. But there are ‘official’ unions too in countries such as Mexico and Brazil. The onset of democratisation process has not weakened the corporatist control mechanisms of the state over these unions. Rather to successfully implement the market-oriented economic policies, democratic regimes have resorted to ‘neo-corporatist’ control policies. Austerity measures, wage cuts and production agreements have been thrust upon the labour in lieu of minimal wage and job guarantees. But are such ‘official’ unions also part of civil society? Autonomy is an important element of civil society organisations but at what point they cease to be part of the civil society is problematic.

Fourthly, some times, political parties and electoral coalitions with some ‘progressive potential’ have also been included under the rubric of NSMs. These include, for instance, the Workers’ Party in Brazil, the Broad Front in Uruguay, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front in El Salvador, and the Movement Toward Socialism and Radical Cause in Venezuela. In short, the list could be endless. But this is not the problem alone. Many of such political and electoral coalitions are transient; others may become turncoats after the elections; and anyway they are all prone to political factionalism and opportunism. Besides, here, civil society becomes political society.

Fifthly, one needs to approach the new found potentials and virtues of the NSMs with caution for another reason too. NSMs are credited with the capacity to transform consciousness and impart practical participatory skills to its adherents. Others argue that new social movements stand for rejection of authoritarianism and contribute to the cause of democracy, even though indirectly. Still others look farther, and find peasant and indigenous movements as alone being capable of promoting appropriate alternative technologies and sustainable development in the face of the destructive onslaught of the forces of liberalisation and globalisation. In reality, all these may turn out to be—and they actually look like—just high hopes. Social movements, notwithstanding their potential, may not always produce positive or major tangible results. For instance, it is often argued that NSMs ‘empower’ people. There is no denying the fact that enhanced consciousness, self-confidence, development of organisational skills and practical knowledge—all elements that constitute the ‘power’ in the empowerment—represent substantial gains for the powerless. But such an ‘empowerment’ rarely involves the actual acquisition of economic power or political freedoms. What is more, with all the tall talk of empowerment, there is little recognition that people may not only become empowered with the sense of their own expanded capabilities, but also ‘disempowered’ and ultimately demobilised. Such ‘disempowerment’ occurs when a movement is co-opted or repressed; or when participants grow disillusioned with the dynamics of group participation or with the behaviour of their foreign or middle and upper-class patrons,

or simply when funding agencies withdraw financial support.

Lastly, one may even question the role of the NSMs in the process of democratisation in Latin America, and perhaps elsewhere too. Social movements did play a significant role in building pressure on the authoritarian regimes, and once the civilian governments were installed, they also sought to press the elected governments for some meaningful political freedom and economic rights but soon exhibited willingness to get co-opted or simply got demobilised. In sum, the vast array of activities that come under the heading of new social or grassroots movements presents a full range of mixed and often contradictory possibilities. For instance, the CEBs in Brazil generally organised the poor for civic action; in Nicaragua they legitimated the Sandinista revolutionary movement; but in Colombia, the CEBs have evolved into a tool of the conservative Catholic hierarchy and have exerted a fundamentally conservative influence over the poor people they organise. In short, the variety of possible outcomes makes the investment of hope, energy and solidarity in NSMs a more complicated matter. This is not to deny their positive aspects. NSMs constitute a new discourse that is narrower, more concrete and full of opportunities for small successes. But, the limited objectives of the grassroots movements render them by and large politically insignificant unless these issue-specific and limited-goal movements are able to inculcate broad vision and build strategic alliances with other grassroots movements. Some of these were clearly evident in the role some of the NSMs played in transition to democracy in Latin America.

14.5 NSMs AND THE DEMOCRATIC 'TRANSITION'

Elsewhere, it has been noted that democratic 'transition' in Latin America has been described and theorised generally in terms of the modes and patterns of transition, role of elite, strategies of negotiations and coalition-building, formation and revival of political parties, etc. For the sake of convenience, let us call this as the mainstream or orthodox literature on transition. This kind of analyses have taken a top-down approach in explaining the transition, focusing on conditions that are necessary for transition, strategic choices that political elite made and coalitions and bargains they entered into, and political and institutional strategies that are necessary for democratic consolidation. Once transition to electoral democracy has taken place, analysts have also called for prudence and caution and a piecemeal approach to reforms, otherwise they fear the return to authoritarianism.

The orthodox literature has generally acknowledged the importance of social movements in the way they hastened the process of political liberalisation. In the same vein however, it laments, but regards as inevitable, the decline of civil society and social movements once democracy has been established. It is also wary of the excessive mobilisation and political pressures from below, and cautions that social movements and demand of civil society for an improved quality of democracy could be destabilising the fragile democracies.

The orthodox, or the mainstream, literature has however been challenged by new kind of recent analyses which highlight the important role social movements did play in the transition and the key contributions civil society is making to entrench democracy.

- i) Since authoritarian regimes had compressed the public sphere, it was left to the new social movements to recapture the 'public space' and defend its 'autonomy'. The NSMs may have been localised, issue specific and non-political but through their activities, they worked

to move political power away from the narrow elite of military junta, civilian bureaucracy and technocracy, and foreign investors. Their demands could have been local and limited but by raising them, social movements were actually invoking the basic issues related to the citizenship rights. For instance, the CEBs, were getting together not simply for religious services. They were also thereby asserting their right to assemble as citizens—a right which they could no longer take for granted under the authoritarian rule. Rural cooperatives, when struggling for land were simultaneously bolstering the political rights and indigenous movements; when demanding their collective rights were also asserting their ethnic identity. In raising their demands, women or ethnic groups were also presaging a pluralist political culture and envisaging a plural and democratic society. They were nurturing and spreading values of diversity, tolerance, pluralism, trust, cooperation and consensus—all so important for the consolidation of democracy.

- ii) An important issue pertains to the linkage of the social movements with the political parties. In the context of the democratisation process, it is also important to understand the linkage between the political society and the state and their relationship with the social movement. No doubt, social movements in the end seek the defence and expansion of citizenship rights, and thus get projected into the political society. So far, such an argument is tenable. However, it is naïve and optimistic to assume a direct path between the insistence on the right to potable water, voting for the opposition and demand for change of regime.

Rather, the linkages and relationship are more complex. For one, social movements may pursue social rights that may contribute not to democracy and citizenship but to dependence and clientelism. In countries such as Mexico and Brazil, labour and others have had a long tradition of entering into clientele relationship with the state, bartering their autonomy for specific privileges and benefits. One therefore needs to examine whether the demands of social movements got satisfied through corporatist and clientele relationships or got transformed into more broad-based demands for democratic political change.

Besides, over time, movements also get co-opted or disarticulated. Social movements, to claim rights, need to mobilise, but this may not be possible or may not last until the demands are met. In Brazil, the wide range of new movements that emerged in the late 1970s focused on everything from the cost of living to gender and race issues, and they mobilised poor neighbourhoods, squatter settlements and working class communities. The new urban middle class was also an important element in this associational impulse and also provided leadership. The middle class and popular sectors also achieved a temporary alliance during the campaign for direct presidential elections (*diretas ja*) in 1984. However since the alliance was temporary and built around a precarious one single demand, it got dissolved soon after the Brazilian congress negated the demand for a direct presidential election. The campaign was no doubt an expression of popular search for a lasting democratic solution but it also revealed the volatility of popular protest and the difficulty in sustaining high degrees of mobilisation. Similarly in Chile, middle class and popular organisations mobilised together in 1983 demanding ‘Democracy Now’, but the different groups lacked any principle of unity or a long-term political strategy for democratic struggle; and the military regime could easily withstand such demands. In Mexico, Cuahetemoc Cardenas challenged the stranglehold of the ruling PRI and had succeeded in mounting a major political challenge during the 1988 presidential election demanding democratisation of the political system. However, the inability to sustain

the coalition of forces backing him and to develop a strategy for democratisation including refusal to negotiate with the PRI regime soon reduced the Democratic National Front to the status of a small opposition party.

- iii) When social movements mobilise to press for their demands, this also entails their willingness and tests their capacity to negotiate with the state authorities. In this way, the NSMs differ from the 'old' social movements, especially of revolutionary types, which were often intransigent and uncompromisingly committed to the goals of revolution. It is at the stage of negotiation and bargaining that many of these movements may get co-opted or neutralised. State may also look less like an enemy of the movements. The Brazilian military government of President Figueiredo (1979-85) had spent considerable resources on housing projects and implemented a wage policy that favoured the poorest of the workers. None of these had meant a commitment to raise popular participation but the military government could neutralise many social movements that were organising the poor. What is indicated here is that the relationship between social movements and state is more complex than simply one of confrontation. Besides, there are still other severe limitations as to what the social movements can achieve through the combination of mobilisation and negotiations.

The interaction of the social movements with the political society may also produce similar results. Social movements fielded candidates in the more urban areas of Brazil for the 1982 elections, but the clientele ties to the party machines either divided and demobilised the movements or led to the creation of parallel and more conservative popular organisations. The strategy of mobilisation and negotiation can only be successful where government itself is prepared to negotiate. The daily protest for 'Democracy Now' had had no impact on the military government in Chile and Pinochet regime went ahead according to its own institutional design and political timetable set forth in the military Constitution of 1980. Any concessions the military regime made were informal and reversible. And when it chose to negotiate, the government simply isolated and excluded the more radical elements making thus any mass-based radical mobilisation very difficult. In Argentina, the military government had preempted popular protest by evicting hundreds of thousands of squatters from the shanty-towns of Buenos Aires; and neighbourhood organisations could do nothing to prevent the continued violence except file judicial complaints. There was nothing in the social movements that could shake the confidence of the military governments both in Argentina and Chile. Or, there are traditional patterns of clientelism that bind many social movements and organisations to the political regime. Large labour and peasant associations remained tied to the PRI regime, notwithstanding political liberalisation and democratic reforms in Mexico during the 1990s. Even after the loss in the presidential election of 2000, many popular organisations remain affiliated to the PRI.

To summarise the aforesaid discussion, there is no doubt that social movements did play a role in democratising political culture, developing community and self-government, and revitalising local politics. They did have a role in the creation of at least the foundations of new democratic cultures. When an authoritarian regime is in crisis, social mobilisation can make a difference to the fact and outcome of democratic transition. Social movements may further weaken the authoritarian regimes through greater mobilisation and also influence the strategic calculations of elite actors in the economy and the state. But, as has been argued, social movements did not have a direct access to the negotiations that underpinned democratic

transitions. By the time negotiations began between the incumbent authoritarian regimes and their civilian counterparts, social movements in all Latin American countries had begun to lose impetus. At this stage, it is the political parties and proto-parties that began to move to the centre stage. Practically everywhere, focus also shifted from specific social and economic goals to party political and electoral objectives. In the model of 'transition through transaction', such as in Brazil, military elite managed to retain inside influence over the state apparatus, and the process of compromise and pacts with civilian political party leaders led to strong institutional continuities including that of the bureaucracy and a strong presidency. Social movements simply were sidelined from the transition process and removed from the centres of power. Their connection with the political parties remained weak and at no stage they could define the political agenda. In short, with the transition to democratic rule, social movements began to decline. This is true not only of Brazil but also practically of all other transition cases.

- iv) The regional economic crisis had also weakened the case of social movements. With austerity measures prescribed by the IMF implemented practically everywhere, social movements everywhere failed to influence the distributional policies of the 'transition' government. Since social movements were at the most only weakly linked with the political parties, most of them were drawn in the sphere of state where democratic regimes simply co-opted some and demobilised others. It is amazing to note the working of traditional clientelistic and corporatist control mechanisms under democratic regimes in Latin America. Democratic regimes have also enshrined many rights into the constitutions which they helped frame or amended the earlier ones. Once many of their demands got constitutional and legal recognition, the political energy of social movements generally began to dissipate.
- v) Another reason for the decline of social movements is their inability to learn the rules of the democratic game. It was impossible for most of them to change from a confrontational style of mobilisation to the one based on negotiations and compromises within the democratic milieu. In the post-transition context, state or its different organs may be receptive or repressive of social movements. Social movements may insist on defending their autonomy or accept clientelism depending on the circumstances. What however is significant is that in a democracy, the relationship with the state remains ambiguous, and the process of political representation remains tortuous, unpredictable and reversible. Often, the new rules of the democratic political game are uncertain. The relationships with the political parties are also more complicated. Political parties do not necessarily have any affinity with the demands of social movements. Also while political parties seek power through territorial representation, social movements continue to press for material benefits and substantive democracy through direct participation, which in the post-transition context, proves irksome to the parties.

In short, in a democratic milieu, social movements need to exhibit new initiatives and imagination to work with the democratic governments. It has been seen that often social movements could not escape the increasing salience of partisan politics in a more open political society, and the democratisation process they helped encourage in the first place created, post transition, the conditions for internal division and competition. At the same time, some social movement activists also sought party affiliations to advance their own careers. As a result, conflicts arose both within the movements and between movements and the parties; and movements and parties drew further apart and closer together in a fluctuating

rhythm. In Argentina, the transition to democracy created greater space for legal action, accentuating the divisions between different urban social movements especially those of human rights. In Bolivia, the advent of democratic government in 1982 catalysed the factional strife within the rural movements. In Brazil, the government of Jose Sarney reinforced the heterogeneity of the social movements and left them increasingly isolated.

The democratic transitions of Latin America have depended on covert and exclusionary pacts between parties that are elite-dominated and socially conservative. Their most likely outcome, as expected, has been the restrictive democracy where social movements are isolated, repressed, or marginalised. But the real results vary according to the national political cultures. The strong state apparatuses and highly developed party systems in Chile and Uruguay appear to have displaced social movements and left them diminished after the transition. Social movements sought institutional expression in parties, unions and NGOs, and could not easily challenge the broad consensus that supported the traditional democratic way of life. In Argentina, on the other hand, the movements tended to suffer not from democratic but from deeply entrenched authoritarian traditions and despite some influence on party platforms for the 1983 elections, they failed to secure more permanent forms of representation and rapidly lost ground. In Brazil, some of the social movements found a real voice in the authentically new Workers' Party, and they mobilised to give it a mass character. Rather than reemerging from authoritarian rule, the Workers' Party transformed itself in response to popular struggle under authoritarian rule and became the centre-piece of an electoral coalition that now controls national government.

Be that as it may, social movements risk demobilisation once they join the political parties or enter electoral competitive arena. In Brazil, the presence of the Workers' Party had encouraged many movements to participate in the elections of 1982 and in the campaign for direct presidential elections. But regional opposition victories in 1982 and the diversions of the national campaign of 1984 both tended to demobilise the movements as vehicles for community or sectoral demands. Even in Brazil therefore social movements risked demobilisation if they participated in party politics. In Chile, the more moderate movements were rapidly drawn into political society as soon as the date had been set for the constitutional plebiscite in 1989, grass-roots mobilisation only lasted as long as the plebiscitary and electoral campaigns themselves. Participation rates dropped dramatically after March 1990, indicating that social movements were likely to be permanently demobilised by the return to democratic politics.

- vi) The transition to democracy however does not mean the end of the road for social movements. On the contrary, the historical record has tended to show that electoral politics legitimates other forms of association and protest by providing legal protections. The rights to organise, recruit, speak, assemble, publicise, and demonstrate are essential to multiparty systems with universal suffrage; and it is difficult for governments to withhold these rights from other social actors even in elite or restricted democracies. In Latin America too, the entrenchment of electoral politics is leading to the spread of social movements; but the character of such movement might be different in that they have to work out new strategies of negotiations and compromises within the democratic process. One can already see that the democratic transition has helped the rise of 'new unionism' in the countries of South Cone. In both Colombia and Venezuela, several social movements have tended to come under an alliance

to challenge the political domination of the traditional two parties and deepen and expand the elite-based democratic arrangements. All through the 1990s, social movements have joined and helped the formation of political alliances representing popular needs and aspirations; and which have contested elections against well-established parties glued to the market-oriented economic policies.

On the evidence of it, social movements are unlikely to radically transform large structures of domination or dramatically expand elite democracies—certainly not in the short term. But they may still have an important role to play in democratising social relations and in mediating between local communities and political systems, thus strengthening the connection between civil society and the institutional politics. The decline of the movements that followed the democratic transition need not therefore mean the end of their political potential. New collective identities have been created. Civil society has been discovered and transformed. Politics is more plural. Democracy is now valued as an end in itself. Indeed the critique of current democratic arrangements as being ‘elitist’ and unconnected with the ‘lived’ experience of the mass of the population has been characterised as the social movements’ perspective. At the moment, the clear predominance of elite over popular democracy is expressed in the strong adherence to neo-liberal economic policies and in the denial of many citizenship rights. It is for the social movements and civil societies to push for a participatory democracy and at the same time seek social safeguards in the liberalising economy.

14.6 WOMEN’S MOBILISATION

Let us examine the above-mentioned generalised description of social movements and their role in the process of transition and post-transition regimes by taking up one of the NSMs viz. the mobilisation of women. The authoritarian regimes had had a specific impact on women. First, there was an imbedded practice of gender inequality, premised on the exclusionary and coercive policies and strategic use of violence by the bureaucratic authoritarian regimes. Women were relegated to the private sphere despite their increased participation in the labour market and educational attainments. In the public sphere, laws, employment programmes, and pay scale all were prejudiced against women; and women played almost no part in the military governments. The military governments of Chile and Argentina had even maintained the *potestad marital* that gave men full control over the person and property of their spouses. Secondly, women faced the worst of the consequences of military rule as their families were assaulted by intimidation, torture, and disappearances; and women themselves were subjected to sexual torture. Thirdly, economic crisis and austerity measures threatened the survival of poor families on the urban periphery; and the period since the 1980s has seen a steep rise in the single mother or women-headed households. Under the circumstances, it was left to the women to defend their livelihood.

The reinforcement of authoritarian culture, with its machismo streak in the family and raising the stakes for economic survival of family, had effectively politicised a private sphere, mobilised women for social action and stimulated them to join the civilian opposition. Thus hence, women’s movements were shaped from the beginning by their role in opposition to military dictatorships. Ironically, military authoritarian rule, which had intentionally depoliticised men, had allowed the ‘apolitical’ women some freedom, which had the unintended consequences of mobilising marginal and normally apolitical women.

The conditions of military rule catalysed three kinds of women's movements. Initially the most visible women's groups were the human rights groups that protested the detentions, torture and disappearances. At the core of organisations like the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights and the Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Argentina, for example, were the female relatives of those who had suffered at the hands of the regimes. In some cases (not in Argentina), their activism grew out of their work in the popular church and therefore received some support from the church. Second, but somewhat less visible were the feminist groups that recruited middle class professionals and women on the left who were frustrated by the failure of left-wing parties to take women's issues seriously. Their numbers and their ideas multiplied with the return of exiles from Europe and North America when some political 'opening' began. They began to provide legal aid, counselling, and education to torture victims, women's groups and also the broader opposition. Finally, there were associations of poor urban women who were forced to respond to the removal of state benefits and subsidies and to the lack of basic services. They were the worst sufferers of austerity measures of the governments. They set up communal kitchens, infant feeding centres, and neighbourhood workshops and attracted support from international agencies and the church. It was the question of economic survival that shaped the social agenda of women's movement and crucially gave it a mass base.

In Chile, the military government had thought of women as dedicated to abnegation and service and therefore its 'natural' allies. Its grand women's organisations had set out to build discipline and civil allegiance. But increasing destitution and repression encouraged a different kind of participation. The church fostered community struggles, the left organised neighbourhood associations, and the existing network of mothers' centres were turned to the opposition's own purposes. The result was an explosion of female organisations with more than a thousand Popular Economic Organisations in Greater Santiago by 1985. The women's groups were distinguished by their capacity to act in unity and to mobilise independently of the political parties. It was witnessed in the massive demonstration of Women for Life in December 1983. Such a mobilisation gave women a high profile during the democratic transition. At the moment of the plebiscite, a Women's Command coordinated the attempts of party activists to reach women voters; and for the first time, the campaign projected women's issues into the struggles of political society. Despite the traditionally conservative pattern of female voting in Chile, 52 per cent of women voted against the prolongation of the Pinochet regime.

In Brazil too, the church had urged women to join community struggles, left wing parties had placed female militants on the urban periphery to mobilise, and the military itself allowed women the leeway to organise because it did not view them as 'political' and therefore 'subversive'. As the regime liberalised, the women's mobilisation grew. In Argentina, on the other hand, the church had given tacit support to the military, the left was decimated in the 'dirty wars' and women's militancy was reduced to and concentrated in the human rights organisations—which explains both their high profile and their isolation. But even in Argentina, housewife's movements spread across the urban periphery during the latter months of 1982 and at the time of transition, each of the political parties rushed to constitute its own women's front in order to win women's vote. Raul Alfonsín's Radical Civil Union took the Madres' slogan 'We are Life', as the leitmotif of its own campaign, and its success was partly owing to the women's overwhelming support.

Women's mobilisation may serve as a litmus test for the fate of social movements following democratic transitions. In Argentina, the human rights groups were disappointed by the failure to

pursue the perpetrators of ‘dirty wars’; and the creation of a National Women’s Agency in the Ministry of Social Security was widely seen as a palliative measure. More positively, the Argentine version of *potestad marital* was modified, divorce was legalised, child-care facilities were extended, contraception was made available, and domestic violence against women became a widely debated public issue. But political party leaders—in power or in opposition—did not fulfill the campaign promises, and women’s political careers were largely confined to government programmes like the National Food Programme and the National Literacy Campaign. Overall, women failed to achieve a higher profile in political society in the transition or include the wider gender agenda in the post-transition democratic regimes.

In Brazil, a National Council on Women’s Rights was established following the transition of 1985, but very few women were elected to parliaments at federal or state levels; women’s demands found only a faint reflection in the 1988 Constitution, and overall women’s mobilisation declined. In a typical trajectory for social movements—when faced with electoral political and political party competition for power—women were removed from decision-making arenas during the presidency of Jose Sarney where male-dominate party and interest group politics took over; and as women’s groups also changed tactics to pressure group politics, they increasingly courted cooptation and division. The popular mass-based women’s movement in Chile also ran increased risks of cooptation in the run-up to the 1989 elections. But, here the risk of cooptation came from the well-entrenched political parties rather than the state apparatus. The male-dominated parties set up women’s sections that were mere appendices of the power structure, and so the principled adhesion to sexual equality was never put into practice. Very few women were elected in the first elections of the transition and thus had no significant place in either legislature or executive. It is therefore not surprising that in Uruguay, where the movement had nothing like the impetus achieved in Chile and Brazil, not one woman was elected to the national legislature in 1985. In sum, it must be concluded that, despite some important policy changes, the political representation of women has not improved substantially with the advent of democracy. Nowhere did women’s mobilisation has secured greater power or institutionalised participation of an enduring kind in the consolidated democracies as in Latin America. But such are precisely the gains and limitations of social movements and the civil society.

14.7 SUMMARY

A robust civil society enhances the quality of democracy by addressing the problems of economic inequalities and marginalisation, though democratic regimes can survive with a weak civil society. Civil society has been weak in Latin America because of the unequal distribution of landholdings and the political pattern of elite domination and role of the state ever since independence. It was from the late 1970s with the process of democratisation that civil society began to expand and social movements came up. In the past, social movements were considered as building blocks in the larger projects of revolutionary social transformation but some time in the 1980s came the new social movements including urban popular movements for housing and electricity, human rights groups, indigenous and environmental groups, women’s groups and popular cultural groups as well as rural and urban trade unions and progressive political parties.

Orthodox literature has generally acknowledged the importance of social movements in the way they hastened the process of political liberalisation but laments the inevitability of the decline of

civil society once democracy is established and also points out that social movements could destabilise fragile democracies. This has been challenged by the recent analyses which stress the importance of the new social movements and contribution of the civil society in entrenching democracy because electoral politics provides legal protection. While social movements are unlikely to radically transform large structures of domination, they still have an important role in democratising social relations and in mediating between local communities and political systems.

14.8 EXERCISES

1. Give a brief overview of civil society in Latin America.
2. What are the main characteristics of new social movements in Latin America? How do they differ from the old?
3. To what extent did social movements and civil society play a role in the democratisation process?
4. What role did the women's movement play in the transition to democracy in Latin America?

