

AEPF10:

Towards a Just and Inclusive Asia and Europe: Building States of Citizens for Citizens Five challenges for Social Movements and Civil Society

By Anuradha M. Chenoy*

The question posed in this conversation in the AEPF 10, Milan, focuses on what are the most pressing challenges facing social movements and civil society in Asia? And what are the perspectives on these? I present five points that argue out five challenges, without prejudice to the many other challenges faced by social movements and civil society organizations (CSOs).

1. There is a contest between three discourses. These discourses are linked to policy, goals, structures, values and thus also to actions. The first discourse which is dominant and most powerful is based on the power-profit-resource hegemony and is maintained by ruling regimes. It is deeply linked to the transnational elite, corporate interests, their beneficiaries and consent producers. It is broadly represented in the neoliberal globalization impetus that is combined with militarized securitization. This combine has appropriated the moral legitimacy of the secular liberal heritage in the West, whereas Asian regimes have appropriated the heritage of the progressive nationalist anti-colonial struggles.

In practice and when translated into policy, this power-profit-resource hegemony reproduces and increases inequality and promotes client-patron relations of oligarchic states that leads to ethnic/sectarian groupings. This paradigm that focuses primarily on growth and increasing GDP is leading to the ravaging of the environment, reducing labour laws and encouraging unfettered consumerism. The economic and social crises that follows supports the growth of right wing parties and community based mobilization. The states then resort to new mechanics of controlled democracy and managed stability.

The second discourse that can broadly be termed as the counter-revolution of violent movements, is the polar opposite and yet distorted reflection of the hegemonic discourse. It rises primarily from the failure and weakness of Asian states to provide rights based, inclusive and just governance. As states fail to provide fair methods of livelihoods and survival, and privilege some community over the others, people have to rely on community/identity based structures and try to seize power for their own community.

These identity/sectarian based movements derive justification from a fundamentalist/sectarian/politicized religion wave, in other instances from acting on behalf of the poor and marginalized, in some instances by violent ethnic/identity movements. They use historical victimization, intervention and occupation for mobilization. All South Asia, West Asian and most East and North Asian states have such movements that have resulted in long civil wars, local conflicts, disturbances, etc.

All of these violent movements have common characteristics: they are embedded in a culture of violence, hierarchy and force, have created militias and vanguards, cannot tolerate/accept difference or plurality, rely on sexual punishment for women in opposition or in non conforming roles. Minorities are seen as part of the other and are targeted, women of the other community are sexually targeted. The interpretations of norms of these violent movements are part of their core ideology. They advocate using their body as weapon. These groups often funds themselves through the capture and sale of illegal assets - for example, the IS funds itself from oil from captured Iraqi oil refineries and their wealth is estimated at \$ 2 billion, with links to illegal networks. Capturing guns and military equipment from regular armies is commonplace. These groups use asymmetrical

warfare. They can forsake reason, rationality, process, legality, for an illusionary end. And they seek to capture power in different regions through local/regional specificities.

The First challenge for social movements and CSOs is to expose the reality and consequences of these narratives. Show their binary impact on each other, how each sustains the other, their impact on people and institutions. And that a non violent alternative is a legitimate possibility.

2. The second challenge is to change the balance of state goals. Most Asian states are tilted in favour of crony capitalism and elites even while they have balanced civil-military relations (India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Korea, etc.). In other states there is direct military intervention (Pakistan), and authoritarian structures and linkages between ruling elite and business (Myanmar, Syria, Thailand, China). In all Asian states there is a drive to capture resources to accelerate growth, violating and neglecting environmental laws and ignoring climate change as a responsibility of the West.

However, almost all states want to retain basic legitimacy and support of the silent mass of people. The second challenge is to win support and get legitimacy and support from this greater mass of people in order to influence and change state and institutions towards a rights based peace and development agenda that nurtures the environment and prevents climate change, creating citizen friendly states.

3. Most Asian States practice a state nationalism based on majoritarian ideas, even when their essential composition is highly multi-ethnic and their constitutions proclaim pluralism. States like India that were based on secular pluralism appear to be shifting away from this. There is a growing intolerance of religious/ethnic minorities (sectarian violence has been regularly rocking all South Asian countries like Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, China etc.).

Any state based on exclusion, discrimination, militarism combined with poor governance that cannot provide equitable development, security and rights, is a breeding ground for right wing sectarianism. Elite linkages with occupying powers give further justification for violent resistance. As Rami Khouri (opendemocracy.net) argues, the IS formed because of the weakness of Arab statehood and governance, as well as because of the weakness of state-society relations. Weak states are unable to include and protect many communities. Since the survival of such states is entirely based on regime survival at the cost of people, they spawn violent opposition. These conflicts, including the current one in Iraq and Syria, is spilling over into Asian states where disillusioned youth generate and sustain victimhood by the selective use of history, permanent victimhood. They construct religion as nation and seek to create a religious-national-terror movement. In this domain the use of body as weapon, concepts as afterlife rewards (like access to virgins) and their self-perception as 'protectors of religion' justifies martyrdom. This narrative is deepened by interventions that are seen to violate their culture and identity. (According to UN Al Qaida-Taliban Monitoring Team (2014), 13,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 80 member states have joined IS and the Al Nusra Front.)

So the third challenge for civil society organisations is to counter both the regime based on majoritarian right wing politics as well as sectarian politics of violent victimhood and retribution. And initiate campaigns that look at the class, cultural, economic and social roots of local groups and engage with them, understand religious and cultural differences, show through empirical and historical evidence, that states that have structures and values based on secular, multicultural, tolerant and democratic institutions, are stable and progressive societies in history. Further, state institutions should insure that policies of inclusion, impartiality, tolerance, justice are permanent.

4. Both the hegemonic and the simplistic counter hegemonic discourses fragment connections between social, political, economic and international relations. They use history selectively to construct models that regimes implement at the behest of international forces, often with disastrous results.

Asian states have been objects and subjects of geo-strategic ambitions and influences. They have been used as outposts for select military security alliances led by the US. There is now a growing rivalry between US-China, that is likely to divide Asia for the interests of the dominant power and the rising power that is challenging it. This is leading to refurbishing already existing military alliances in Asia (e.g. the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Pakistan, Singapore have stepped up their security alliances with the US). There are new security dialogues with emerging powers like India, Indonesia and Vietnam. The focus of such a geo-strategy is based on containing some powers and balancing others which raises the possibility of a new Asian cold war. With such choices, national security is used to enforce a consensus in foreign policy, for war and threat perceptions. In these circumstances democracies give in to militarization; multiple party systems are reduced to singular voice.

The geo-strategic interests of great powers is evident in the new coalition of the permanent war against terrorism with new partnership with Arab States who are offering diplomatic, intelligence and military support - Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain and Jordan, thus broadening the war, trying to show that it is a multilateral effort and with others defraying expenditures. In exchange these mostly authoritarian states will get legitimacy for their own internal repressions. The attention from the many different forms of Islamist/religious sectarianism is likely to shift, as is the informal support structures to sectarian, illegal and fundamentalist networks.

The fourth challenge for CSOs is to show this interconnection and an alternate security and foreign policy system that asserts an independent path of development and security. Alternatives exist in institutions like UN where Ban Ki-Moon has exhorted that terrorism must be defeated but not in a way "that deliberates acts of provocation that they set for us – victimization, further radicalization and more civilian deaths" (UN, 25 September, 2014).

The fourth challenge also includes analysing the new formation of the BRICS and examine, if this is a viable alternative or whether these countries are merely pushing their own agenda for accumulation of capital, resisting the Dollar, and negotiating for greater space in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The fourth challenge thus is to unveil the connections between the international, regional, national and local contexts; show the intersection between the domestic and the foreign; the weaving of social, economic and political structures.

5. The fifth and critical challenge for social movements and CSOs is to fight for the survival of the idea that the alternative is possible and for their own survival, as these are the new front lines of the discourses of wars and ideas of militarized neoliberalism. As economic and social crises' of different kinds continues to spread, hegemonic powers get more aggressive. Social movements and CSOs are targeted. Some examples: Baba Jan in Pakistan, an anti dam activist, gets life imprisonment; the former Indian Prime Minister states that foreign funded NGOs were responsible for cutting down India's development by 5 percent and intelligence agencies are inquiring and harassing these select NGOs', especially those that have popularized people's concerns on environment and climate; in Thailand, journalists who obliquely questioned the military have been sentenced. As analysts like Ben Hayes have shown, there is massive evidence to show that counter-terrorism is being used to crack down on all forms of dissent, on civil society organizations world

over. Thus the idea and the subject of the alternative must survive and be assisted in their struggle by those who value democracy and the survival of the planet itself.

Conclusion

Social movements have to work for inclusive agenda and policy making, where people decide issues of security, war and peace. Asian civil society and social movements should work for an egalitarian civil society based on green development and gender justice.

Neoliberalism is diminishing local resources, enabling the penetration of a consumer culture, endangering local trades and industries. There should be sustained attempts to regain local knowledge and practices suited to such countries.

There is a need to articulate and spread new forms of people friendly markets through cooperatives and where possible collective farms, here, learning from previous experiences including failure are a must.

To meet these ambitious goals it is necessary to take all possible measures to collect funds to enable radical organizations like AEPF and others to continue to develop alternative paradigms countering a hegemonic, consumerist and militarist system.

*Professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi