



**The Partisan Civil Society:  
Analyzing Civil Society Engagement in Partisan Politics**

**Session 1: Civil Society and Partisanship: Strange Bed Fellows?**  
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**Summary and Synthesis**

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**Resource Persons:**

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**Guide Questions for Discussion:**

1. What do literatures and experiences abroad say about civil society and its partisan potential?
2. What do civil society actors and groups in the Philippines say about partisan involvement?
3. Is the “partisan civil society” phenomenon uniquely Filipino?
4. Why is it occurring in the Philippines?

**Gladstone Cuarteros**

Introduction:

> Philippine Civil Society (CS) has been politically partisan as seen in its history, the link between development work with empowerment, and given the weakness of political institutions such as political party on the one hand and the state having monopoly of resources and power, on the other.

**Key Discussion Points by Cuarteros:**

1. Civil Society vs. Political Society
  - The core basis of the discussion borrowed from Diamond and Silliman and the conception of an organized social life and voluntary action

- Civil society has a “public end”, relates with the state but does not seek to win control over the state; encompasses pluralism and diversity
- This is a contrast to Political society, which seeks to win control of the state or to position itself within that context and for that purpose. An example of this the political party which involves in elections
- Given the historical development in the Philippines and the dictatorship, CS engaged politically
- In the Philippines the engagement of CS was with, outside of, and within the state, even as local organizations played as claim-makers by engaging with the state

## 2. Partisan Practices of Civil Society

Civil Society has had a history of partisanship such as through the selection of candidates (Kompil II in 2001), endorsing candidates even campaigning for them, and leveraging votes of the poor with politicians’ commitment, the formation of political parties through the party list, and recently, the alternative outreach network that supported the candidacy of Padaca (2004) and Panlilio (2007). Civil society was also involved in training on poll watching and training for politicians or political aspirants.

## 3. Should Civil Society be partisan?

Why not?

- Civil society helps in transforming the state
- Involvement in temporary reforms such as critical collaboration
- Direct implementation of policy
- In the absence of strong political parties, Civil Society has role to fill in

However, there are caveats:

- Civil society’s freedom of activity may be impinged by its political engagement
- There could be minimal outcome in its cooperation with government in the case of “backing the wrong horse”
- Disregard for or weakening of political parties

## **Henedina Abad**

Introduction:

It is from practical voice that I would like to speak, as organizer, coalition builder, and politician.

The concern of civil society is for government to provide the basic services, restore the people’s trust in government and public institutions. However, civil society is described by politicians as “noisy”, “do not want a lot of things”, but do not deliver the votes.

## **Key Discussion Points by Henedina Abad:**

1. Definition of civil society:
  - According to White, civil society as voluntary organizations
  - Typology of organizations (based on Karina David): welfare, development, policy advocacy, ideological but not electoral, developmental and electoral)
2. What are we getting into: Partisan politics? Electoral politics?
  - Civil society has always been partisan and is already partisan, based on issues, ideology, and sometimes electoral politics
3. How are we going to engage in electoral politics?
  - Electoral politics is a competition for political power
  - Given the reality that there are no political parties and if civil society want to be a significant player in electoral politics, it has to be a significant political force. The problem is how? Where would civil society draw its strength?
  - A positive trend is that civil society has credibility, it can influence the debate at national level and can influence the candidates, and voters trend to be more independent and therefore such influence may take effect upon thinking voters, and finally, the media has been influencing the public's mind

## **Highlights of the Group Discussion:**

1. Does endorsing candidate/s diminish the credibility of civil society?
2. Taking a position has a consequence : for example, those groups that supported the people power change of administration in 2001 and who got the peace bonds were thought to have been “rewarded” by the administration by “winning the peace bonds’ despite strict and thorough procedures that went with the awarding of the bonds.
3. Civil society is partisan – it is partisan to people empowerment, good governance, and social justice.
4. If civil society is a countervailing force to the state – whether outside, inside or alongside it- then it should be a stakeholder in power. However, such power is not for power sakes, i.e., not just domination over material and human resources but it is about empowerment or mobilizing human potentials. Restraint on power is the operating principle.
5. Partisan politics has a challenge. When one listens to other political players, one’s view or position on an issue could change and when this is relayed to members of civil society, the CS do not necessarily have the same appreciation of the position or view in the same way that parties or partisan players see the issue. The issues and position on the said issues should be thoroughly discussed with civil society.

6. In between elections, people's organizations and communities are alongside civil society organizations, but during elections, the communities are with "mayor". This should make civil society reflect whether the politician has something to offer there for the community, which the civil society cannot.
7. The evolution of the terminology "civil society" in the Philippines is practically seen in light of the dictatorship in the 1960s – non-government organizations was used, and later on, cause-oriented groups, social development agencies and civil society were invariably used across time.
8. Civil society is a confused term – having its roots in the Western discourse, civil society having come from a particular context and time, is viewed as an outlier of the state and as such, an observer of the processes of the state. It is an entity that lies between the state and the market. As such, civil society is not engaged in running state power. On the other hand, civil society assumes many varied roles – but basically as "protester" or contestor of power; it is a form of communication by the community especially based on what it observes and what it analyzes as the processes of the state and the market.
9. Engaging in electoral politics and being partisan to electoral politics has a different requirement from the engagement of civil society as "observer of the process", "communicator", and "challenger to state power".
10. Certainly, there is much space for individuals, rather than civil society, to engage in electoral politics or partisan politics. Especially given the rich experiences of the individuals, they may engage in electoral politics but not the civil society. However, these individuals have to learn from the electoral codes and practices.
11. The engagement in partisan politics or electoral politics (if these were synonymous) have different requirements, and a process might be necessary before one participates. It may not be proper to ask the question: 'Should Civil society be partisan?', because they are partisan along democracy, justice, freedom. However, electoral politics is a different partisanship altogether.
12. Over the years, especially during the post Marcos dictatorship, there has been a political vacuum left which was why we failed to fill in democracy and the defense of democracy. This explains why the traditional politicians regained foothold on power. We hardly talked about democracy and the defense of democracy.
13. Political parties are concerned with not just one issue, nor one cause – they are concerned about a whole range of issues.
14. Citizenship is another sphere to locate the engagement of people, individuals and organizations with power. In citizenship, one speaks of territory, people, and government – and the issues around these are strongly political.
15. Given these concepts and the practical needs of the time, could there be a larger framework to discuss strategies on electoral politics- strategies which are not fragmented but are linked to various initiatives and strategies that involve civil society and other political actors?

## **Synthesis and Conclusion**

Despite the claim of some people in the forum not to engage in the theoretical definitions of civil society, both resource persons and participants did go into an extensive discussion on the definitions of civil society. There is recognition that civil society is a western construct, defined at a particular time and context in history. The

definitions locate civil society as an intermediate entity between the state and the market, thereby civil society takes on a questioning and challenging position on the excesses of either the state or the market. As such, civil society is placed as observer or a reactive element in society vis-à-vis the state, and which forms opinion, assessment, and a point of view used to forward a message thru to the state. Civil society is a form of communication by quarters of society that lies outside the state. Moreover, civil society is diverse as it broadly includes church, family, academe, and others apart from development organizations called non-government organizations. Some of these groups may be perceived as partisan, but it is difficult to say that generally, civil society is partisan, precisely because civil society has broad constituency. It includes other sectors beyond non-government organizations.

Civil society and non-government organizations are terms interchangeably used in Philippine historical context. Given the historical context of martial rule and the NGOs' role in fighting against the dictatorship, civil society had been partisan in the sense of having to take the cause of social justice, freedom, and empowerment. Taking such position is being "partisan", albeit not quite, if involvement refers to the context of electoral politics.

There is a view that civil society is considered as 'communicator', a role differently taken by partisan groups involved in electoral politics. However, there is no stopping someone or anyone who have had rich experiences in civil society work to engage in electoral politics, especially as there is need to engage the state and the way to engage state power is through electoral politics.

There is recognition amongst the group that electoral politics requires a different process from what civil society knows either by tradition or by training. Engagement in electoral politics requires a "mass base" for one, and transactional engagement for another. Electoral politics is therefore a different terrain for civil society.

A more pertinent question to ask is not whether civil society should be partisan, but how does civil society as a plurality of constituents, attempt to fill in the political vacuum that exists since post-Marcos days? Certainly, there is a vacuum left that democratic society should fill in. As there was neglect of democracy since the re-installation of formal institutions after Marcos, the traditional politicians had re-claimed the center stage. All along, the rest of society and of civil society had failed to talk about democracy and the defense of democracy. That is a more central question that faces civil society.

Among the challenges to civil society are as follows: what could be an undertaking that would push for and defend democracy in the country? What is civil society's role there? How could project democracy be done? Politics broader than electoral politics, which would see civil society members as citizens and within the framework of citizenship, raises another challenge to civil society as a sphere that interfaces with the public domain including the state. Is it possible for civil society to frame a strategic engagement where it could also locate electoral politics as something linked to, not segmented from the rest of a political project?