

Refereed article

Mapping Pakistan's Heterogeneous, Diverse, and Stratified Civil Society and Democratization — Gendered Tales of Collaboration, Networking, and Contestation

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Summary

Pakistan's civil society is marked by diversity in its forms of and spaces for agency, organization/institutionalization setup, value systems, agenda-setting, and the profiles of its constituent members — ranging from critical public intellectuals and dissident citizens to donor civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and socially segmented, as well as politically engineered, sociopolitical movements, among others. This leads to what can be understood as civil society being a highly heterogeneous, diverse, stratified field, one subject to the need to navigate through, and cope with, multiple sociopolitical cleavages, an often adverse sociopolitical climate, cycles of autocratic regression and fragile democratization attempts, rentier mentalities, as well as the securitization impact of multiple conflict dynamics and processes, to name just a few bedfellows. One of the primary consequences of civil society's configurations is the paucity of cross-cutting potential for solidarity, agency, and transformation, as apparent in the protests of Qadri and Imran Khan in Islamabad in 2014 or in the 2007/2008 Lawyer's Movement — actors all claiming a democratization agenda as their own. A certain exception, the author argues, are parts of the equally diverse and heterogeneous women's movement, part of civil society as a whole (as well as its gendered segment), who are collaborating and/or contesting with each other over multiple ideas and projects related to gender democracy and democratization. In this article four different and rather contrasting examples of gender-specific civil society activism will be reviewed, therein analyzing three representative challenges: (i) AASHA (Alliance Against Sexual Harassment Act) — the challenge of cooptation, collaborative politics, and/or lobbying; (ii) Subalterns Act — the challenge of grassroots activism in a stratified, militarized society; (iii) JI women activists — who are challenging transnational gender rhetoric and empowerment concepts through faith-based, party politics-linked activism; and, (iv) The TQK — the challenge of how to fight social invisibility and political marginalization.

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