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## Civil Society in Uncivil Places: Soft State and Regime Change in Nepal By Saubhagya Shah; Reviewed by Jagannath Adhikari

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# CIVIL SOCIETY IN UNCIVIL PLACES: SOFT STATE AND REGIME CHANGE IN NEPAL

BY SAUBHAGYA SHAH

Washington, D.C.: East-West Center (Policy Studies 48).  
2008. ISBN: 9781932728774

REVIEWED BY JAGANNATH ADHIKARI

This monograph discusses the role of civil society in the Jana Andolan in April 2006 in Nepal, the popular movement that abolished Nepal's Hindu monarchy. Shah argues that a major reason for the visibility and effectiveness of civil society during this political movement was the material and moral support from external agencies, mainly development partners. These agencies, Shah argues, had a vested interest in regime change, especially in making Nepal a secular state. The author also attempts to distinguish "civil society" in Nepal from western conceptions of civil society.

The author defines all forms of media, NGOs, groups or associations and their federations or networks as "civil society." He clumps together all these agencies as civil society and then attributes the overthrow of the monarchy to all of them collectively. But the ground experience I have observed is that although most of these agencies, or civil societies, protested against the monarchy, only a few played a significant role in bringing the political parties, Maoists, and external agencies together. Of them, the media, Nagarik Samaj and Nagarik Andolan were especially prominent. At the time, seven prominent political parties had formed an alliance, called the SPA (for Seven Party Alliance). Even before the SPA and Maoists came together through a "12 point agreement" in New Delhi under the mediation of Indian politicians, the SPA had been organizing protests in Kathmandu. The media supported this protest. When SPA and Maoists protested against the King jointly, the media also played a significant role, so much so that many people considered the media the eighth party. Nagarik Samaj and Nagarik Andolan, the two most prominent civil society organizations, were formed after King Gyanendra seized political power. These organizations were able to motivate people to revolt against the King at a time when political parties had also lost popularity because of their dismal performance in the past. Other agencies increased their protests as the momentum for change heightened. Grassroots organizations such as women's groups, forest users groups, trade

unions and farmers' associations all mobilized to protest. The author argues that the networking of these civil society organizations was responsible for increasing their participation.

Shah places this observation within a much larger argument about the origins of civil society in developing countries. After a brief and clear discussion regarding the origin of civil society and its changing forms in the west, Shah argues that civil society in developing countries like Nepal is usually the imposition of a western idea developed in a very different historical, political and social context. He distinguishes between "civil society" and "political society." In the context of Nepal, he points out, this distinction is blurred. Here, civil society groups have emerged as multifunctional forms that incorporate flexible portfolios of development, welfare services, advocacy, and political activism under the influence of 'the global North', or 'developed countries', on which these groups are dependent for funds and ideas.

In my view, although one cannot deny the dependency of NGOs or civil society on external donors and the latter's influence in terms of funding and ideas, it would be an exaggeration to claim that political change in Nepal was possible only through the action of externally-funded civil society. The author claims that civil society flourished in Nepal after 1990 because donors believed that civil society was needed for development and thus provided ample funding. But civil society in Nepal also developed and expanded in the 1990s because it was restricted during the Panchayat period from 1960 to 1990. During that period, only those supporting the regime were allowed to work. The establishment of democracy in 1990 made it easier to form an NGO and other forms of association. This political change also gave more rights to people and users of resources to organize their communities and manage local resources for their own benefit. For instance, all community forest users groups were formed because of a change in the government regulations, especially the Forestry Act of 1993. Nepal's own forest bureaucracy was instrumental in bringing this Act because it had learned from three decades of experience that only the people can protect forests. Later on, user groups developed their networking through federations, which was also a local innovation. These groups were instrumental in the protests in 2006, mainly at the district level. But, of course, they also received some external funds.

In contrast to the author's argument that civil society in Nepal grew from outside efforts, I believe that civil society in Nepal has followed the same trajectory as in the west. Historically, civil institutions developed in response to local needs and they operated largely at community levels. Later on, civil society became a part of political society in Nepal, especially during the Panchayat period. During this time, the State helped to promote certain organizations in order to strengthen nationalism and to disseminate the ideology of the

political system. But only those few civil society organizations that supported the system were allowed to operate. This point has been ignored in the book. The third stage of civil society, which seems to have occurred after 1990, can be termed “anti-authoritarian,” as civil society organizations, particularly NGOs, were geared towards building democratic institutions, respecting human rights, and promoting grassroots alternative development and transparency. The involvement of civil society organizations in these areas could be because of their self-interest also. They could work freely in a democratic political system. Moreover, they knew that this system enabled them to improve their condition. Therefore, they worked against authoritarian rule. Their activities certainly reached a climax during King Gyanendra’s direct rule.

The author is right that civil society organizations, mainly NGOs, were in touch with Maoists during the armed conflict. But this was more so for continuing development work than for supporting Maoist political ideology. A few NGOs at the national level had good relations with Maoists. Most NGOs at the district level continued their work, negotiating with the conditions imposed by the Maoists.

The author’s implicit argument that the funding by external donors of civil society weakened the State is also largely unfounded. Civil society, as a whole, still receives only a fraction (13 %) of external funds that comes to Nepal. The State has far more control of external funding. Therefore, the role of external funding in catapulting civil society to prominence seems largely overstated by the author. Moreover, the relative economic independence of people because of the gradual breakdown of feudal relations—thanks to globalization and increased mobility and remittances— was also a force for their political activism through various associations.

I am also not satisfied with other claims of the author, namely that after the regime change the activism of civil society declined (p 43); that there was no reduction in political killings and violence after the regime change (p 43); and that external interests wanted to make Nepal secular (p 46). It is a fact that political killings declined after the regime change. Political killing was at its height during the King’s rule from 2004 to 2005. On average 6 people were killed every day. After the regime change, the political killing declined drastically, despite some growth of armed organizations in the Tarai. The activities of civil society, particularly NGOs, have increased, and even their funding base has grown. But the media has not given much coverage to the activism of civil society in the post Jana Andolan period. During the Jana Andolan period, the media adopted a single mission— restoring democracy— because it knew that it flourished only in this political environment. Similarly, the declaration of Nepal as a secular state was more in response to the pressure from indigenous groups. Maoists wanted to have secularism because they had promised non-Hindu groups, especially the Janajatis, that they would remove Hinduism as the national religion and make the country secular. Moreover, a Hindu State would be against the Maoists principle of “class struggle.” Other parties

in the SPA also opposed a Hindu State, even though they were not so vocal in this respect as the Maoists. In fact, in 1960 the Nepali Congress had promulgated a constitution declaring Nepal to be a secular state.

Despite these criticisms, *Civil Society in Uncivil Places* provides an understanding of how civil society can be an important actor in political change. The only weakness of the book is that it seems to exaggerate the role of civil society in regime change in Nepal and the role of external funding in their activity.

*Jagannath Adhikari researches environment and development issues. His most recent book is Food Crisis in Karnali: A Historical and Politico-economic Perspective. His email is jagannath.adhikari@gmail.com.*

## THE SARI SOLDIERS

DIRECTED BY JULIE BRIDGHAM,  
PRODUCED BY JULIE BRIDGHAM AND  
RAMYATA LIMBU

New York: Women Make Movies, DVD, 92 minutes, 2008.

### REVIEWED BY RAMA LOHANI CHASE

*The Sari Soldiers* is a documentary shot live during the last few years of Nepal’s armed conflict, called the People’s War, which lasted for more than a decade (1996-2006). It captures the multiple dynamics of the civil war in Nepal, which claimed more than thirteen thousand lives and caused hundreds of disappearances, placing Nepal near the top of the list of countries with human rights violations. Initially, I wondered whether this documentary’s title was another exotic play on words that further victimizes third world women as metaphors in a cross-cultural transaction. However, the oxymoronic juxtaposition of “sari” and “soldiers” is apt if understood in the context of a heavily patriarchal society where women are seldom expected to lead, show courage, or fight as soldiers are expected to do. The term “sari soldiers” could even help to redefine the gendered connotation of what bravery, courage, and leadership mean or the type of gender that can embody these qualities. In other words, we ought not to understand the role of soldier only on the battlefield.

Six courageous women are the key protagonists in the film. Militants and soldiers of peace, justice, human rights and democracy appear in the forms of Devi, Mandira and Ramkumari. With persistence and resilience, Devi Sunuwar, a poor *dalit* woman, seeks justice for her minor daughter Maina, who was accused of being a Maoist, and abducted and