Civil Society and Counterinsurgency

by A. Lawrence Chickering

Since the end of the Cold War—and especially since 9/11—civil society has become an important potential strategic instrument for both foreign and national security policy. This is obvious from the logic of the new challenges that have appeared from the "weak states" that have become the new priorities for policy.[1] Governments from Pakistan to Egypt are weak because they do not control—or command allegiance from—their largely independent, tribal societies, and they lack the capacity to provide effective leadership for change. The organizations that have an important role to play in influencing these societies are civil society organizations (CSOs), and they need to become active in order to promote significant change.

Despite the importance of CSOs and despite rhetoric to the contrary, both the military and non-military sides of the U.S. Government have made no effective effort to recruit CSOs as active partners in designing and implementing policy in areas where they could help. This failure occurs partly because CSOs are a new potential policy instrument, and the government lacks the knowledge and experiences to recruit them as partners. Policymakers do not know what they are capable of doing or how to cooperate with them. Even when they aim to implement a "CSO strategy", as in Afghanistan, they often do not understand how to design a strategy for maximum impact, without internal inconsistencies, with different parts often canceling each other out.[2]

The failure to implement an effective CSO strategy is also rooted in the fact that both the government's foreign policy and national security institutions and policies were established to deal with governments or states, operating through formal mechanisms and addressing *objective* issues alone. They were not established to operate informally, in partnership with private organizations and non-state actors, often dealing with *subjective* issues of culture.

The same is true of private foreign policy and national security institutions that support governmental policymakers in a variety of ways. These include universities and private policy organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations and regional foreign policy organizations— and also their associated journals of foreign and national security policy. All of their research and relationships are with governments and states; they have nothing to do with civil society organizations that operate outside formal government systems. You can read years of articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The National Interest*, *Orbis*, and other journals and not find a single article about the crucial role that CSOs need to play in the new international environment. When they are discussed at all, it is often to complain about how they are taking power and authority away from governments.

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[1] More complete statements of this perspective may be found in A. Lawrence Chickering, Isobel Coleman, P. Edward Haley, and Emily Vargas-Baron, *Strategic Foreign Assistance: Civil Society in International Security*, 2006; and A. Lawrence Chickering and P. Edward Haley, "Strong Society, Weak State", *Policy Review*, June/July 2007.

[2] For more on this subject, see my SWJ article, "Humanizing 'The Man': Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan", in SWJ, October 11, 2010.

In his fascinating and detailed chronicle of how the Obama Administration approached and engaged the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bob Woodward (in *Obama's Wars*) writes absolutely nothing about how policymakers addressed CSOs as an important potential resource supporting foreign and national security policy.[3] The problem is not Woodward's. He wrote nothing because there was nothing to write about—they completely ignored the issue, just as predecessor administrations did, and just as the organizations and journals continue to do.

Following both their training and their experiences, the foreign policy and national security communities know only about governments and how to interact with them. They know almost nothing about societies, culture, and especially civil society organizations, which have special knowledge of societies—and special capacities to interact with and influence them.

"To a man with a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail." This old joke explains the problem: people approach the world in terms of what they know. Everyone says the geopolitical world has radically changed. There are many ways of describing how it has changed. One way is in terms of the shift from strong states to weak states. Perhaps the most revealing way for our purposes here is to say it has changed from a world best understood by the rational, *objective* analyses of law and economics to a world greatly influenced by *subjective* issues in anthropology.

Despite this enormous change in the world with which we must interact, the community of "experts" who analyze, research, and make and implement policy toward this new world, which is no longer a nail, is exactly the same as before. Despite some limited changes and protestations to the contrary, therefore, policy remains as before: focused on states. Although we *know* things are radically different, we keep doing what we have been doing—because "we" keep pretending the world is a nail.

Our failure to understand these societies renders us helpless to engage them. Trying to understand and engage the Arab and Muslim states from Pakistan to Egypt, for example, requires understanding their tribal cultures and sub-group loyalties, animated by preconscious, subjective relationships. These cultures are as antagonistic to law and economics as they are, at a personal level, to outsiders. Antagonism to outsiders is a major challenge for COIN in Iraq and Afghanistan because the U.S. and the central government in both countries are outsiders. It is also a challenge because the subgroup loyalties and the failure to communicate across those loyalties drive internal conflict and retard nation-building.

Recent Policy Misadventures

Recent efforts to engage this new world of weak states, relying on governments alone, and with no serious strategy for engaging societies, have been rife with misadventure and staggering costs. In Pakistan, for example, U.S. policymakers blamed President Musharraf, who took power illegally in 1999, for his failure to reform his government along lines of a Western democracy—by holding elections and respecting an independent judiciary. When Musharraf refused to hold elections and started interfering with the judicial system, Western observers concluded he was really a closet autocrat, with no real commitment to democracy. The stage was set for a crudely controlled experiment. When Musharraf was gone, and a democratically-

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elected government had taken his place, we could see if the absence of formal institutions of democracy was really the problem. It was not, of course: Pakistan remained and remains a mess.

It should have been obvious then, as it is certainly obvious now, that the failure to reform formal democratic institutions was not and is not the real problem in Pakistan. The failure to reform was an *effect* of the fact that this tribal society, in which 60 percent of people marry their first cousins, lacks the national consensus and cohesion that support Western democracies and are essential to their effective functioning. Western governments pushing democratic reform on Pakistan without addressing the underlying issues of society and culture—especially the challenge of widespread, subgroup loyalties—doomed and doom the democratic project in Pakistan, just as failure to understand these issues and how to address them is undermining COIN in both Afghanistan and Iraq.[4]

Not only are we often giving them bad advice, Western officials and pundits then blame the leaders of these countries for their failure to accomplish in a matter of months *changes the Western democracies took centuries to accomplish*. How can one exaggerate the brutality of this treatment of people trying to do their best under impossible circumstances? It is all the more troubling when one considers that this kind of thing is built into our "highest idealism". It would be no surprise to hear people in these countries say: "They [meaning us] not only give us bad advice. When we don't follow it because we know it won't work, they call us names. Why are they surprised that we hate them?" There is no reason at all to be surprised.

Pretending that weak states are strong and demanding they do things they cannot do is perhaps the single greatest failing in recent efforts to engage especially the Arab and Muslim world from Pakistan to Egypt, which has become the priority region of geopolitical concern.

The military failure precisely parallels the foreign policy failure, although the military has been forced to advance its thinking far ahead of the State Department. Following the army's *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, the military has shifted its strategy to try to win support of the populace of countries threatened by insurgencies. But the military has only gone part way toward a policy that genuinely engages the societies of these weak states. While its primary concern is now about protecting people rather than killing insurgents, it follows the State Department in believing it is possible to build effective democratic governments in tribal societies by focusing on central governments alone—without engaging local communities, where tribal societies have their real existence and life.[5]

Mobilizing Civil Society for Empowerment

Although civil society issues—from broad issues of non-state sectors to specific CSO models—are strategically important, we do nothing to research them, refine models of action, and especially address key political challenges of working in other, very different cultures and political systems. Initiating a serious research initiative, supported, perhaps, by establishment of an institution like RAND for the purpose, should be a very high priority. The question remains, if we commit to do serious research in this area, who would do it? The answer certainly should not be the experts on "international relations and foreign policy", who know only about states. A

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[4] For a more thorough discussion of social and cultural challenges of tribal societies, see my paper, "Humanizing 'The Man': Strengthening Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan", Small Wars Journal, October 11, 2010.
[5] For a more complete statement of the need, see my SWJ article, "Humanizing 'The Man'", in SWJ, October 11, 2010.)

question in fact arises about why these "experts" would even *support* such research, which would challenge their worldview as the exclusive perspective for policy.

These remarks explain much of why our "civil society strategy" is failing in Afghanistan and is not *beginning* to accomplish what it needs to accomplish in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other countries. There are two essential problems with the current civil society strategy in Afghanistan. One is that it lacks clear guidelines and objectives—some programs promoting empowerment of people and others disempowering them—leaving no clear narrative guiding people's perceptions of major issues there.[6] The other problem is that the overall strategy is focused on reforming and marketing the central government, with insufficient attention being given to *engagement with and empowerment of local communities*—together with a strategy for connecting communities and the government.[7]

The greatest impediment to implementing an effective civil society strategy supporting COIN is lack of clarity about objectives, as well as lack of clarity about how different models of civil society action will influence outcomes. A major problem arises when military (and sometimes CSO) Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) move into communities without consulting anyone. Greg Mortenson's book *Three Cups of Tea* should have made clear the importance of ceremony when engaging traditional communities, yet stories are widespread that PRTs often move into communities without understanding that *how* they engage communities will often be as important as *what they do*.

There is no space here to address these issues in depth. (For those interested, I explored them at greater length in a recent article in SWJ.[8]) The central point is that CSOs need to focus on *empowering* people rather than "*helping*" them. The choice arises because help in some forms empowers people, but in other forms actually disempowers them. Understanding the difference is essential for designing and implementing an effective civil society strategy. At present, much of what we are doing in Afghanistan is disempowering people by helping them in the wrong way. In the process, we waste staggering amounts of money, while also actively undermining larger counterinsurgency objectives.

Some CSOs have proven records of accomplishment in addressing these issues of society, culture, and empowerment; and they have a crucial role to play in this new world of weak states and counterinsurgency warfare. To avoid future mega mistakes, beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, policymakers and their attendant, private communities need to understand the difference between helping and empowering—understanding how to help *and* empower. From such understanding we can start building the capacity to engage CSOs and develop new civil society instruments for supporting both foreign and national security policy.[9]

Conclusion

Until 9/11, U.S. foreign policy focused on states that were strong in two senses: first, because they competed with the United States geopolitically; and second, because their

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[6] Ibid.

[7] For an excellent discussion of this issue, see David Ellis and James Sisco, "Implementing COIN Doctrine in the Absence of a Legitimate State", SWJ, posted on October 13, 2010.

[8] See A. Lawrence Chickering, op. cit.

[9] See A. Lawrence Chickering, et. al., op. cit.

governments controlled their countries. Until the past two decades, policy focused only on governments because they were the only significant players in international affairs.

After 9/11, things started to change in both ways. The countries that have become the new, priority concerns of foreign policy, such as the Arab and Muslim countries from Egypt to Pakistan, are not strong in the sense that they compete with the U.S. geopolitically, nor do they control their societies as even they did before. States that are now "weak" were strong fifty or even thirty years ago because they did control their societies. Egypt's President Mubarak, flying in a private plane over Cairo's City of the Dead, explained the difference to a friend as follows: pointing down at the forest of television antennae below, Mubarak said, "That explains why I cannot control this country as I did in the past." Emerging independent societies had become a force in their own right, and after 9/11 non-state actors became the principal threats to security.

These changes have created the need to develop new institutions and policies for non-state sectors and societies. This is especially true of civil society organizations, some of which have proven records of accomplishment. They can play a variety of important roles to engage these societies, empowering people by allowing them to share ownership—giving them a stake in the system. (When people have a stake, they have a reason to resist forces that are trying to bring the system down.) These roles include, as examples:

➢ Promoting property rights for the poor (CSO based in Lima, Peru, now operating in about a dozen countries in all global regions);
➢ Engaging groups in conflict with each other, empowering them to work together, increasing social trust, and reducing conflict (CSOs working in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and India);
➢ Engaging communities of people around government schools to become active stakeholders in the schools, and empowering the communities to reform the schools and do community projects (CSO based in California operating in India);
➢ Developing and promoting an agenda for economic and social policy reform (CSO based in Panama, with impacts in more than fifty countries);

The need to engage civil society in these and other ways is a very large, unsolved challenge in Afghanistan. The need is to identify models that are working and then invest at strategic scales in them. The challenge is evident in Afghanistan and in virtually all tribal societies threatened by insurgencies or potential insurgencies, which includes many countries in the world.

The question remains unanswered about how to encourage the community of people who dominate the public debate on foreign and national security policy and know only about states to open space for a new community of experts who understand societies and how to influence them. Opening up the debate to ideas that are really new, rather than the faux novelty in the state-centered strategies still coming out of the foreign policy community, will be crucial to solving many of the major challenges facing foreign and national security policy. How we succeed in opening up the debate may well determine how and even whether we can engage a new world we know very little about.

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