

CHAPTER 2

DEFINITION OF GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY: WHAT IS GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY?

According to John Keane, the word “global civil society” came into existence at the end of 1980s. It was born out of the advent of globalization; an awareness of the destructive impacts from environment degradation, the growth of neo-liberal economy and concern out of the detrimental impact of civil wars.⁸ Keane points out some interesting characteristics of global civil society.

First, global civil society refers to nongovernmental structures and activities. Simply speaking, elements or entities which have nothing to do with state authority possess the quality of global civil society. “It [global civil society] comprises individuals, households, profit-seeking businesses, not-for-profit nongovernmental organizations, coalitions, social movements and linguistic communities and cultural identities.” Keane provides vivid and clear instances of global civil society, including multibillionaire Bill Gates, Myanmar pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, multinational corporation (MNC) Sony, anti-Beijing social movement Falun Gong, international nongovernmental organization Transparency International (TI), and Arab news media Al Jazeera. He also notes that these entities and personalities share a similar feature, that is, their activities or their existence traverse geographical distances.⁹ In other words, their existence and practices are beyond the limitation of state boundaries. For example, Sony is a world-renowned MNC which instills cosmopolitan people with the “Walkman” culture, compelling urbanized people worldwide to possess the portable audio players. Moreover, the brave and relentless fight for democracy against the military-ruled government in Myanmar of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi prompted a group of western singers led by Irish rock band U2 to compose a song for her. In this sense, Suu Kyi is a member of global civil society in as her determination to grow democracy in her

⁸ John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

home country transcends the restriction of the authoritarian regime to allow outsiders to be aware of what she has been doing. In return, the civil society compositions help amplify her effort transnationally and trivialize the state role.

The second feature of global civil society lies in its civility. Keane underscores the meaning of civility on politeness towards others, and on the absence of violence.¹⁰ Actors in global civil society adopt peaceful methods of movements. My personal interpretation out of Keane's work on the politeness towards others is that the politeness element is vital in the global civil society because this kind of society is global in nature, in the sense that the members in the society are global people who possess various nationalities and identities, and different genders. I therefore believe that politeness and openness are crucial for the members of this society in order to orchestrate the coalition to achieve their purposes. Furthermore, the members of this society are nonviolent and tend to refrain from the use of violence. This quality shows the sharp distinction between global civil activities and global uncivil activities. The crucial difference between the two groups of movement is "politeness," which embraces the sense of openness and being gentle to all. Global civil society possesses the politeness while global uncivil society does not possess such a quality.

Keane points out the third quality of global civil society in the nature of society. "It refers to a vast, sprawling nongovernmental constellation of many institutionalized structures, associations and networks within which individual and group actors are interrelated and functionally independent."¹¹ In other words, global civil society is society simply because it embraces the existence of various groups and individuals into the community. These groups and individuals have interaction with one another.

Last but not least, global civil society is global. As the word suggests, it is global in the sense that the elements and members in this society are from various nation-states in the world. Keane beautifully compares the quality of being global of

¹⁰ Ibid., p.12.

¹¹ Ibid., p.11.

civil society with a biosphere to show the complexity and its interconnectedness. He explains that even the no-go areas for global civil society movements, such as Myanmar, Afghanistan and Chechnya, some elements of global civil society manage to operate.¹² For example, Burmese people can listen to short-wave radio news reports from BBC (British Broadcast Corporation), the global world-renowned media outlet. BBC Burmese section claims that it has 7.1 million weekly listeners in Myanmar.¹³ Meanwhile, mega-cities are likened to abundant ecosystems where elements in the system exercise their interdependence and interconnectedness with one another. In summary, according to Keane, global civil society is the society of various actors which practice globally, civilly and nonviolently.

The next question one should ask is whether the global civil society, which traverses state boundary, comprises members with various backgrounds, and operates nonviolently, can empower and energize the effort to solve the problem in the far south. The following section asserts that the power of global civil society has unfortunately been unable to rectify the situation.

¹² Ibid., p.18.

¹³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/burmese/institutional/aboutus.shtml>.