Covid–19 and the Civil Societies of South Asia

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Abstract

This article presents the liberalisation of the economies of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as having downscaled the degree of support for public health care and systems for the needy in the countries of South Asia. Civil society organisations (CSOs) stepped in. Still, they often could not establish sufficient funds to fill the gap and, in many cases, the governments suppressed CSOs and the media due to their critical voice. In many cases, CSOs have toned down such critical voices and limited themselves to improving specific social situations as such activities have been allowed and in some cases supported by the governments. The outbreak of Covid–19 led to ad hoc mobilisation of the civil society and temporary changes in the working situation. Despite this, most governments have limited ability of CSOs to work during the pandemic. In a larger perspective, Covid–19 has not created anything approaching the kind of neoliberal crises predicted by Slovaj Žižek, but the new level of restrictions introduced leads one to consider if they will be turned back after the pandemic, or if the restrictions will be retained, as predicted by Giorgio Agamben.

Keywords: Covid–19, South Asia, Civil Society Organisations, CSO, Neoliberal economy, Slovaj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben.

The outbreak of Covid–19 dates to the first week of December 2019, when patients with a then-unknown form of pneumonia with 'uncommon symptoms' presented themselves at a hospital in the Chinese city of Wuhan. By the end of December 2019, the virus had been identified as a unique variant of Coronavirus and the news media reported that, in January 2020, Chinese authorities were struggling to contain its dissemination by restricting the freedom of movement in ways that had never been seen outside of wartime or inside of prisons. All over the world, people remembered the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic, which appeared in Asia in 2002 but lost strength and had disappeared from the public eye by 2004. This was not to be the case with Covid–19. On 30 January 2020, the WHO declared a world health crisis, which it upgraded to a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

Bangladesh responded early to Covid–19 by imposing travel restrictions in January 2020 and South Asia's first comprehensive lockdown, from 23 March through 30 May 2020. Covid–19 reached Pakistan at the end of February 2020. In India, the first case of Covid–19 was identified on 30 January 2020 and a complete lockdown of the country was imposed from 25 March. [1]

The aim of this thematic issue on *Civil Society in the Time of Covid–19* is to study the spread of the pandemic with its resulting cases of death, terror and anxiety due to loss of income or employment, together with the large demands it put on governments and civil society in South Asia. This article aims to introduce some general themes in a more systematic fashion. First, we consider a scholar who wrongly predicted the fall of the neoliberal world order, and then a scholar whose concerns reflect ours. Then we will turn to the pandemic's meaning for civil society as it developed in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Revolution against the Neoliberal Order or Imposition of a Perpetual Crisis from Above?

Several scholars have argued that the Covid–19-pandemic during 2020 and 2021 has transformed the world as neoliberal economic governance proved incapable of providing sufficient protection for the populations. To open the discussion with a very strong position, we may turn to Slovaj Žižek, living in Slovenia, in Europe. He argues for a fundamental change in the neoliberal economic systems and for developing a new balance between states and individuals in the economic system. In fact, he foresaw the Covid–19 pandemic as the catalyst for a full-fledged reawakening of communism in a new, collaborative international order. Žižek circulated his argument on the internet and in the media well before he published the first of his three books on the *Pandemic* on 24 March 2020.

From a global perspective, political consequences in this direction have not been observed. Although some governments have fallen partly due to their handling of the pandemic, [2]

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1   Partly based on Prakash et al., 2021, Prakash 2021 and Andersen et al., 2021. Wikipedia's continuous updates on the Covid–19 in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka offer further information.

2   Inept handling of the pandemic has been forwarded as a reason for Donald Trump's defeat in the USA presidential election in November 2020.

the policies of their successors have not proven to be much more effective. In the long run, democratic or authoritarian regimes may fall due to their handling of the pandemic. Democratic regimes may move towards authoritarian forms and authoritarian regimes may become more democratic. Such changes are significant from a within-country point of view, but it is increasingly evident that they will remain within the borders of states or unions of states. Nonetheless, the full systemic impact of this interface of governmental systems' management of the pandemic is still to emerge, wherein the role of civil society organisations (in all their variations and complexities) is likely to play a central role. Scholarly attention to the direction of such changes should be constant and critical.

However, it does *not* follow that Covid–19 has passed through the world without leaving any impact on the systems. Another European resident, Giorgio Agamben of Italy, has put forward a continuous critique of lockdowns around the world. He fears that the governments are using the pandemic as a cover for implementing policies that solidify their hold on power, at a minimum, and might enable them to obtain absolute power (since February 2020, Agamben 2021). For Agamben, the goal 'for the government is all about maintaining control' (28 March 2020, quoted in Agamben 2021:28). And he argues that the epidemic has provided a 'way to cultivate a climate of panic, establishing a state of exception that imposes severe limitations on mobility and suspends the normal functioning of life and work' (26 February 2020, Agamben 2021:11). In his view, his prediction had come to pass as early as 28 March 2020:

> The epidemic has made clear that the state of exception, to which our governments have actually accustomed us for quite some time, has become the normal condition. People are so used to living in conditions of perpetual crisis, that they seem not to realise that their lives have been reduced to a purely biological condition that has lost not only its political dimension, but also what is simply human (28 March 2020, quoted in Agamben 2021:28). [3]

And he underscored his argument by adding:

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3   As evident, Agemben has not taken WHO's upgrading of Covid–19 to a pandemic into his language.

> A society that exists in a perennial state of emergency cannot be free. We
> live in a society that has sacrificed freedom for so-called "security reasons"
> and has hence condemned itself to living in a perpetual state of fear and
> insecurity (Ibid.)

We note, however, that his formulation from 'quite some time' into 'a perpetual crisis' and 'a perpetual state of fear and insecurity' took place over only a few weeks, retrospectively turning the preceding weeks into eternity and predicting that the present authoritarian moment would be extended ahead for another eternity. Agamben's anxiety is related to his long-stated critique of the social consequences of the state of exception. Even if Agamben's general anxiety has turned out to be overstated, it is highly relevant to consider how various governments responded to the pandemic in relation to their civil societies. We can see that state impositions of various kinds of restrictions and controls over individual life triggered strong social reactions at different places in the world, but we can also see that many states have revoked numerous restrictions as the pandemic eased. We hope that the pandemic will now be kept under control and we will not see closedowns or curfews of the kind witnessed in 2020, 2021 and, in some places, 2022. Though it may happen, it is better to structure investigations of the impact of the pandemic on civil society in ways other than Agamben's all-embracing position.

The following will introduce the changes in *civil society since the transformation towards neoliberal economics*, and how the earlier collaboration between the states and civil society moved stepwise towards *new forms of control imposed on civil society*. Developments that hollowed out health systems and weakened civil society in the immediate pre-Covid period. After that, we will turn to the developments during Covid–19.

Neoliberal Economics and Civil Society

Neoliberal economic theory, which has gone through a number of transformations over decades, has had a direct bearing on civil society in the countries of South Asia, which have deregulated and opened their economies to foreign investment in various tempi. Sri Lanka was the first, opening its economy in the late 1970s, followed by India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 1980s. All four joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) at its creation in 1995. In each, deepening global economic linkages corresponded with a rise in the Gross Domestic Product and a decline in the poverty level. However, these positive results concealed that the structural changes in the economy left some groups behind.

Overall, India's rural-urban development gap got worse and regional gaps became more pronounced (migration article in this issue). Further, many groups have criticised governments for privileging commercial conglomerates in their competition with smaller businesspeople and farmers. These policy choices have generated civil society responses in the form of organised protests and heated debates in the public sphere. Recently, significant and sustained protests followed the passing of market-deregulating policies for agricultural products in September 2020. Whereas the government promoted the liberalisations in price formation, market and commerce as socially and economically beneficial, the many protesting farmers saw them as giving large commercial actors unfair advantages over workers and farmers. This and similar protests against market liberalisation are instances of classical mobilisation, in which civil elements join to inform the government in no uncertain terms of the difficulties created by certain policies and urge the government to reconsider them.

Several authors argue that the Covid–Pandemic has increased the inequalities associated with market deregulation and liberalisation. Further, neoliberalism-inspired changes in administrative structure have reduced the government's ability to help citizens in need (Malini Balamayuran and Nadarajah Pushparajah, Zeba, and Pradeep Peiris and Hasini Lecamwasam). Another question is how far the pandemic has transformed civil society. To come to grips with this question, we have to look at the longer trends in the relations between the states and civil society. Here we will address the formation and regulation of various kinds of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Against the backdrop of the fall of the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe under Soviet hegemony, many governments and global governance structures like the WTO and the World Bank saw an opportunity to impose neoliberalism throughout the world. They saw CSOs as a crucial element of this process. In 1997, the World Bank decided to include Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) in the activities it supported, envisioning the possibility that CSOs would join 'the world of advocacy, lobbying, human rights, and politics in general, groups and their goals', and the NGOs included interest groups, veto groups, grassroots movements, social movements, and protest movements', as all 'these discrete classifications could as easily be subsumed under the rubric NGOs' (Ibrahim 1999:7).

While this seems to be an endorsement of civil society as traditionally understood, one can observe that the emerging international CSOs embedded neoliberal values in their mission statements and their collaborations with domestic CSOs emphasised projects that furthered neoliberal goals. Even at the civil level, the ability of organisations to serve the

most vulnerable population segments was curtailed. This organisation-level change was complemented by changes in the way governments regulated CSOs.

In India, the process of '[t]ightening of NGO regulations [...] has been slow, ongoing and deliberate' as stated by Patrick Kilby (2011:15), with continuous references to foreign support for subversive agencies since the 1970s (ibid.). In 2010 the *Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act* of 2010 raised new administrative obstacles for the local NGOs and branches of international NGOs (INGOs). During the last decade, many organisations continued their work, but it has become increasingly difficult to obtain the permissions needed to receive foreign contributions, especially after the promulgation of the *India Foreign Contribution Regulation (Amendment) Act*, 2020 (Ghosh 2022).

The military has had a large say in Pakistan since Independence, to the extent that Pakistan is sometimes termed a garrison state (e.g., Ahmed 2013); other classifications, like overdeveloped state focus, on the impact of the state on development at all levels (e.g., Whaites 1995). In any case, the government has prevented formal NGOs from working for education and improving conditions for women and workers. Since 2001, Pakistan has worked to include CSOs in the local development process, but this is within an overall authoritarian approach, and it is up to discussion whether the inclusive process has been successful (Rosilawati et al., 2018). As far as the control of the CSOs is concerned, Pakistan has demanded since 2013 that both local and international CSOs have to re-register, and the registration process has steadily become more burdensome. The formal argument for these obstacles is 'national security', but the experience of the CSOs is that a lot of irrelevant documentation is demanded (Ahmad 2021:66–7).

Bangladesh has developed a vibrant civil society over the years. But lately, the space for CSOs has faced new constraints, imposed by the dual trends of market economy and authoritarianism that are seeping into its polity. This has been especially so in the case of CSOs that focus on issues associated with human rights and freedom of speech. Nonetheless, Bangladesh is continuing its tradition of accommodating 'service delivery NGOs', which it sees as partners in development. This strategy perhaps is due largely to the realisation that neither state nor society, alone, is capable of serving Bangladesh's huge population.

As mentioned earlier, Sri Lanka's economic liberalisation process was set in motion by a right-wing government elected in 1977, preceded by nearly two decades of state-led

development under left-of-centre regimes. Those regimes had attempted a structural transformation of the largely agrarian economy, to pave the way for a more diversified economy. Still, they were challenged by inadequate capital formation, and by pressure from a fast-growing population that demanded livelihood opportunities and welfare provisions. A slowly growing economy and increasing costs of public services like education, health and transport did not leave much surplus to be invested in capital goods such as imported intermediate goods needed to develop agriculture, industry and services. Persisting high levels of unemployment, particularly among youth, and widespread poverty led to unrest among disadvantaged, unemployed rural youth, culminating in a major youth uprising against the state in 1971 led by a radical youth political party, the People's Liberation Front (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna). The incumbent left-of-centre government became unpopular among the people, despite some efforts to respond to their grievances.

Against the above background, the right-wing, private sector-oriented United National Party, campaigning on an economic liberalisation platform, secured a landslide victory in the 1977 parliamentary elections. Unlike in neighbouring India, where the national leaders were reluctant to embrace neoliberal ideas and open the country's economy to foreign capital, the leaders of the newly elected Sri Lankan government were quick to adopt an open economic policy. The impact of this policy not only on the economy but also on social sectors has been drastic, resulting in economic, social and even cultural transformations. Increasing participation of local and foreign capital in the economy and other sectors reduced the state's role, leading to a more significant role for the private sector in both economic and social sectors. These developments resulted in greater income inequality and consumption-based social disparities across Sri Lankan society. These developments underpinned a second wave of unrest in the late 1980s among disadvantaged segments of the population, especially the disaffected youth. However, unlike in 1971, the ideological orientation of the uprising in 1988–89 was more complex, due to the influence of ethnicity-based identity politics that became a significant aspect of national and sub-national politics in the country. This tendency was also a reflection of the segmentation of Sri Lankan society on ethnolinguistic lines brought about by education and language policies adopted by successive post-independence governments. What should be noted here is that a militant, anti-state Tamil youth movement had been active since the mid-1970s and soon evolved into an armed struggle for a separate state in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, one also must recognise the role played by the post-1977 social and economic neoliberal transformation in creating structural conditions that underpinned youth uprisings in Sri Lanka. In this regard, increasingly unequal opportunities and rural–urban disparities in education and employment have been highly significant (Hettige 1996; Hettige and Gerhard 2015). These trends were further reinforced by the increasing economic and social significance of the Colombo metropolitan region following post-1977 neoliberal economic reforms. Given the growing role that private capital began to play, not only in promoting economic growth but also in the expansion and diversification of social sectors like education and health, the role of public investment in education and employment creation became less significant (Peiris and Lacamwasam in this issue).

Covid–19

In Bangladesh in Covid–19 times, governmental interventions failed to reach the broader population regularly or systematically. Civil society organisations generally tried to direct whatever resources they could muster to address the pandemic. The government generally gave free rein to CSO interventions that focussed mainly on service delivery. It even permitted empowerment strategies cultivated by CSOs, especially when these supported awareness-building and strategising protection on pandemic-related issues. From the government's perspective, these activities were not in opposition to the establishment, as the pandemic was not considered a '*partisan*' issue. That is, though there were criticisms against various strategies taken by the government on Covid–19, (for example, hiding the actual rate of school attendance or the malpractices of health institutions in the early phases of Covid–19), these did not amount to a direct threat against the party in power. The government was confident that the population understood it was doing its best in an impossible situation.

In post-reform Sri Lanka, development assistance agencies began to assign a greater role to non-governmental organisations in the spheres of development and social welfare. On the other hand, interventions by non-governmental organisations, almost entirely dependent on project-based assistance from international development partners, could hardly match the range, regularity and depth of welfare programs implemented by mature welfare states in other parts of the world. This naturally left many areas of welfare and social protection inadequately addressed either by the state or the development NGOs, including private charities that emerged in the neoliberal era.

Civil Society Organisations

Civil societies in South Asia have undergone significant structural transformations since the 1980s. Where the organised CSOs aimed to solve social problems or change state social policies, they could be seen as independent of the governments. But with the influence of neoliberal economic theories, governments began to include CSOs in governmental management of social problems and turned them into tools of the state. Sometimes it was done in order to downsize the state in line with the neoliberal ideology, sometimes to engage people who were in close contact with the needy and could address their problems more precisely than the existing government programs. In both cases, CSOs adapted their strategies to fit funding options opened by the governments (Chitrakshi Jain in this issue).

Since the mid-1980s the government of India has initiated a policy of funding Indian NGOs insofar as they are politically neutral and work with targeted programs, for example, for rural development (Kilby 2011:17), income generation, literacy, and women's empowerment. This has led to an increase in the number of NGOs but strongly limited their critical potential, as they are compelled to work along the lines of government policies. Even so, politically neutral target areas are identified by politicians who aim to be re-elected, and areas selected typically do include vulnerable populations in social development processes.

NGOs in Bangladesh have played a continuous role since the country's emergence as an independent nation in 1971. Their part as development partners began to rebuild a war-damaged economy, then focussed on agro-based production, and more recently in protecting both urban and rural workers' rights, promoting gender equality and advocating anti-discriminatory policies for socially excluded communities. The prominent and pervasive role of NGOs in the earlier years was due to the weak private sector, limited government outreach to remote areas, intervening military regimes that denied a system of public accountability, and lack of connectivity in a country with a famously high population density. As these factors were addressed in the government's development policies, the role of NGOs became more controlled and institutionalised, to a point where CSOs are feeling the pinch as, gradually, their space is being constrained.

In Sri Lanka, NGOs active at the national level became more visible, influential and vocal following the adoption of economic liberalisation policies and the consequently declining role of the state in addressing issues of poverty, inequality and marginalisation of minorities. However, they increasingly reflected their funding partners' liberal and

international outlook, which did not please more ethno-nationally oriented civil society groups. As a result, nationalist regimes over the last several decades have increased their monitoring and regulation of NGOs.

The Public Sphere

By turning NGOs into politically neutral development agencies and curbing collaborations between local NGOs and INGOs, national governments in South Asia have restricted the potential for civil society movements to advocate for some government policies and protest against others. Nevertheless, many kinds of public spheres co-exist.

Formally, the media are basically free, but there are many attempts to press media editors and journalists. In Pakistan, in particular, this can be violent (Bhattacharya 2016).

Scholarly and literary contributions can be published freely all over South Asia, yet we see many individual moments when writers are intimidated in an attempt to bring their work in line with government policy, or just to turn them silent. Intimidation is sometimes pursued through the legal system, and carried out by independent non-state actors at other times.

Civil Society under Covid–19

At the arrival of the Covid–19-pandemic, civil society had no choice but to take on roles abdicated by patently incapable and unwilling states. While little argument can be made against this assertion, all was not rosy in this sector. Components of civil society followed the lead of the states' lockdowns or curfews and arrogated policing functions that can never be seen to lie properly in their domain (Chitrakshi Jain in this issue).

Nonetheless, one cannot overstate the yeoman service that civil society – in all its expressions and organisational forms – performed to offer succour to the ill, hungry, dying and indeed, the dead. Civil society's haphazard effort found the depth to feed millions of poor, stuck without work or food. Happily, civil society swiftly mobilised ad hoc structures to secure and distribute food, medicine and medical oxygen to the sick. And many reports attest to CSOs engaged in disposing of the dead in the face of family members themselves being hospitalised. It is not an overstatement to argue that civil society in its disparate forms was present across South Asia, even as several governments took inappropriate steps. In addition to institutionalised CSO responses to the Covid–19 emergency, there were also examples of individuals spontaneously coming together in the

public sphere, to deliver food and non-food items to remote places, liberally using the help of technology to, for example, make connections through social media or use cellphone-based money transfer mechanisms (bkash for Bangladesh).

Governments everywhere took a two-pronged approach to pandemic management: reduce spread by enforcing lockdowns, social distancing and mask use; and reduce mortality by expanding the health services. They imagined their efforts to be successful during the first wave, but their sense of achievement proved to be misplaced when the horrific second wave arrived. There was simply no hospital bed to be had for love or money, and medical oxygen and other medicines were in tragically short supply.

It must also not be overlooked that civil society was being asked to fight with one hand tied behind its back. As we have seen, civil society in much of South Asia had been all but hollowed out under the policy shifts by a hollowing out of liberal freedoms in the years before the pandemic. Funding for CSOs was squeezed, notably by disallowing foreign sources or making transfers from them burdensome. Numerous steps were initiated to ensure compliance of statist diktat by CSOs while each and every articulation of an autonomous argument was seen as suspect. This fact takes us back to the question of the truncation of citizen rights (in this issue, see Sukanya Bhardwaj, and Pradeep Peiris and Hasini Lecamwasam). In Bangladesh, however, banks simplified the transfer of international remittances to individual accounts tagged for Covid–19 relief purposes. Likewise, at least for a short period, Pakistan opened for easier recognition of NGOs and INGOs.

These factors need to be closely considered in any analysis of post-pandemic order because the organisational and institutional changes that emerged (such as aggrandisement of state power for a curfew lockdown) might not end with the pandemic; here, we share some of Agamben's concerns. In some of the countries of South Asia, a state–civil society relationship chapter begun during the pandemic may become the standard template for post-pandemic claims of rights, contestation of statist policies and indeed, demands for welfare functions and policies for the poor or health for all. Unlike Žižek, we do not foresee a fall of the neoliberal order, much less the creation of a new economic order based on communist ideas. We do not see indicators for such developments, nor for the creation of a new international, collaborative order, in any South Asian country. These countries appear to be uncapacious with respect to taking on large-scale welfare functions

or being able to regulate capital. These factors, when read together, forbode a period of contestation during which civil society promises to play a starring role.

Covid–19 in South Asia

The sudden appearance of the Covid–19-pandemic forced governments throughout South Asia to make quick decisions in the fight against the pandemic, some of which might have long-term effects.

India's prime minister announced a short curfew on 19 March 2022, which was quickly extended to an extensive, intrusive three-week ban on leaving home. This first lockdown rendered vast numbers of people unemployed and without any means to move from the major cities to their families in rural areas. The very strong and sudden initial lockdown, including much of the public transport system, compelled many workers to take to the roads and walk towards their far-flung family homes (Zeba in this issue). As they had no funds and the state was unwilling or incapable, civil society came to the rescue as CSOs mobilised ad hoc activities to feed and shelter the internal-migrant workers.

All state-level powers were subsumed by a national order that simultaneously centralised power and resources, even as responsibility was decentralised to the states, leading to different strategies for involving local administrative bodies and civil society organisations.

In the middle of April, the country was divided into zones and pandemic management was based on the assessed threat level for each zone. Consequently, states developed their own strategies to mitigate the pandemic's impacts and their own approaches to collaborating with local institutions and/or local civil society organisations. In West Bengal and Kerala (Naz and Joseph, 2021; and Sujit Kumar Paul in this issue) Panchayati Raj (local governance bodies) institutions were activated and seem to have successfully mitigated the sufferings of people, especially migrant workers, in many places. Kerala has been singled out for praise (Sandanandan 2020). Similarly, Delhi depended on a peculiar form of CSO, the Resident Welfare Organisation, for lockdown surveillance and management, and for the provision of some public services (Chitrakshi Jain in this issue).

In other instances, the government referred to the pandemic as it shut down ongoing civil protests. This was the case with the protests against the implementation of the *Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019* (CAA), which introduced a new pathway toward citizenship for

many international migrants, but effectively excluded Muslim migrants from consideration for Indian citizenship and provided a mechanism, the National Register of Citizens, that could lead to the expulsion of Muslim families who had been in the country for generations (Sukanya Bhardwaj in this issue).Tharoor (2020) sees this as one of many steps taken by India's government in a process of 'etiolation' of democratic institutions, and wonders whether they will be allowed to return to their former, strong condition. Tharoor is agnostic. On the basis of a long number of issues, he argues that the government utilises the pandemic, in part, to legitimise its quashing of civil protests. In this regard, he is in line with Agamben's concern that a state of exception, once introduced, will be retained.

In Bangladesh, the civil society's influence on the government's response to Covid–19 varied. Civil society was highly successful in influencing the state to mobilise its resources in support of Covid-impacted migrant workers, who constituted the largest source of foreign exchange earnings through remittances and hence got high-profile media attention when they were forced to return to Bangladesh (Syeda Rozana Rashid in this volume). On the other hand, among socially excluded communities like the *Rabidas* and the *Patni*s, two Dalit groups in northern Bangladesh, state intervention was minuscule and negligent. Their ability to come up with coping mechanisms in the face of extraordinary misery and suffering is a testimony to their resilience (Matiur Rahman in this issue).

In Sri Lanka and elsewhere, decades of neoliberal economic and social policies produced structural inequalities that left the country ill-prepared to face a major public health challenge and cushion the vulnerable segments of the population, already in a precarious situation because of lack of good governance. Among the many steps the government took against Covid–19 we note that the civilian government integrated military leaders into civilian governmental institutions and allocated some of its authority directly to the military. As a result, the military was directly involved in both supportive and coercive management roles in the country's northeast, where the Tamil population continues to view it with suspicion (Malini Balamayuran and Nadarajah Pushparajah in this issue). Within education, the shift to online learning had disastrous effects for the many students who did not have access to the necessary technology, thus deepening pre-existing social divides (Pradeep Peiris and Hasini Lecamwasam in this issue).

Pakistan's federal government sensed the need to involve CSOs in the fight against Covid–19. This led it to open a fast track for registration of INGOs who already collaborated within Pakistan. INGOs that wanted to address the Covid–19 emergency

were exempted from the usual demands for a No Objection Certificate (NOC), which enabled them to receive funds from abroad.[4] As stressed by Warraich (2021: 228), '[s]uddenly, the "enemies within" progressive civil society were government allies'. This opening, however, was discontinued only a few months later, in July and August 2020. Representatives for the NGOs united under the Pakistan Development Alliance criticised many aspects of the government's pandemic management. On the organisational level, they criticised the lack of collaboration between the federal and provincial governments: unilateral federal actions led to mistrust. Regarding needs for the most exposed sectors, they pointed to the lack of protective equipment for agricultural sector workers, and to the fact that many inhabitants had been excluded from seeking cash grants, as Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs) had not been issued to them. Warraich (2021: 229) foresees post-pandemic CSO conditions that are similar to those of pre-Covid–19 times. His analysis differs from Agamben's in two ways. First, the government of Pakistan did *not* tighten its hold on civil society organisations. Second, the loosening was temporary; some freedoms had already been curtailed earlier and others are expected to be curtailed soon. At the same time, skills and connections developed during the pandemic, notably those associated with internet-based opportunities, may improve the situation, particularly from the CSO perspective.

Taking a comparative look at South Asia, Covid-19 has had a range of impacts on the relations between governments and civil society. First of all, new forms of social interaction have increased, that regard the internet and ad hoc organisation of relief activities – changes which may lead to long-lasting limits on government control over civil society. On the other hand, we see that Sri Lanka's military, which was allocated the authority to enforce Covid-19-restrictions, performed its duties in ways that deepened existing ethnic conflicts. The government of Pakistan also tightened restrictions on civil society in non-public-health ways. For its part, India introduced new citizenship regulations during the pandemic. The developments in India may be in line with a long-standing policy, but Covid–19 made critical responses from civil society more difficult than they would have been without Covid–19.

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4   Much information on Pakistan is based on Warraich (2021), who refers to the undated announcement of 'New Guidelines for the INGOs to Work with NDMA / PDMAs In Covid 19 Crises' <https://ingo.interior.gov.pk/>.

Religion

Religious bodies rather than religious communities may well be considered as CSOs insofar as they are separate from the government. This does not mean that states and governments do not attempt to enlist religious bodies and their followers to support state and government politics. Pakistan is an Islamic republic, while India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are secular states that formally divide the realms of state and religion. The Sri Lankan Constitution blurs this formal line, stressing that the state shall 'protect and foster the Buddha Sasana' and gives Buddhism 'the foremost place' (Article 9), while asserting 'the freedom [of every individual] to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice' (Article 10). In Pakistan, the federal government has regularly supported and collaborated with Sunni Deoband madrasas (Islamic schools), whereas relations with Barelvi madrasas have been minimal, and the government often has worked against madrasas related to Ja'afri Shi'a Islam, such as by banning TV channels that promote Shi'a positions.

The split between the different groups is reflected in the fact that Barelvi authorities in Pakistan supported the lockdown, while some leading Deobandis demanded an early opening of mosques. Weak coordination between Deoband in Pakistan and India is evident in the fact that the Sarul Uloom Deoband in India issued a fatwa that allowed mosques to remain open, as long as no more than five people were present at a time.

There were critiques of travellers bringing Covid–19 with them back to Pakistan from visits as for instance of Shi'a Muslims returning from *Zavaari*, visits to the Imams and holy places in Iran (Warraich 2021). From a larger perspective, it seems that the pandemic situation entered through many channels, including people returning from Saudi Arabia and Great Britain, and the choice of whom to criticise revolved more around politics than public health. This tendency also was seen in India, as analysed by Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger in the current issue.

Though the current regime in Bangladesh claims to promote and protect secular values, the country's Muslim majority projects itself deeply and powerfully at the societal and community levels. Hence faith-based institutions like mosques, madrasas and even faith-based CSOs play an important role in securing the well-being of people at the community level. This has been especially so in crisis-ridden moments like floods, cyclones, droughts and the recent pandemic. The pandemic, however, was different from other kinds of crisis, as it affected the total community and country, as opposed to certain sectors or regions. This meant that resource reserves in the family, community and society were constrained

and quickly depleted; when everybody is in need, traditional channels of borrowing and helping are ineffective (Matiur Rahman in the current issue).

India's constitution underlines that the country is a 'socialist, secular, democratic republic' (Preamble). In practice, this means that, for many years, state and central governments have collaborated with all religions but privileged none (Tharoor 2020:155). This has been a core value of the Congress Party since its founding in the 19th century, but has also been supported by atheist parties as well as most of the parties that support the Hindu right. Recently, however, the principle has been challenged by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which has governed the country since 2014. During the early part of the Covid–19-pandemic, there was a backlash against the Muslim world, and Muslims in India often were held responsible for dissemination (Tharoor 2020:233). In this light, Hinduism has been placed in a complicated relationship with the pandemic: a new Corona Goddess emerged and is understood both as the creator of the virus and as crucial to a successful fight against the illness. Some people reporting on her emphasise that she appeared as a reaction to bad governance of state governments against the central government. Still, in other regards she may be understood as linked to Hindu nationalist points of view (Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger in this issue).

In Sri Lanka the minorities of Muslims and the Tamils, most of whom are Hindus, experienced harsh treatment from the police and military also during pandemic times (Malini Balamayuran and Nadarajah Pushparajah in this issue).

Fine arts and media

All over South Asia, artists responded to the pandemic in pictures. Facades were plastered with encouragements to keep distance and disinfect, and numerous are the photos of real people in front of such murals, thus offering extra dimensions to the original artwork. Rohingya artists in refugee camps fought fear through murals and music to calm their fellows, waiting for inoculations. One Sri Lankan poster shows a man with the Sri Lankan flag as a mask protecting him against infection. The general feeling is that the posters supported the protective measures prescribed. Artists of low and high standing joined the effort to encourage people to follow public health advice. Adivāsī (tribal) scroll-painting and performance artists, however, faced loss of income, because the lockdowns separated them from their clientele. NGOs and private donors did a lot to help them at first, but relief funds for them dissipated as the second wave of Covid–19 hit. Some of these artists

turned to social media and, in at least one case, the story accompanying a scroll painting 'went viral' in the Internet sense. (Sanjukta Das Gupta in this issue).

On the other hand, the media were not blind to inconsistencies and contradictions embedded within the imposed politics. An article forwarding a strong critique of the Indian prime minister's willingness to celebrate the Kumbh Mela, a pilgrimage involving millions of people, was illustrated with a photo backing the protective means the PM had just side-lined. The photo shows a mural of a young boy wearing a mask and an oxygen flask on his back as he plants a sapling, and a real health worker in a newly inaugurated oxygen wing for Covid–19 patients in Kolkata (*FP* India, 23rd May 2021, photo Dibyangshu Sarkar). The conflict between the considerate illustration promoting caution and the article's text attacking the PM for being incautious is striking. Here we meet some of the divisions raised in India due to Covid–19, namely the attempts, partly successful, to reify Hinduism and Islam as conflicting communities. A position supporting Hindu nationalism and seeing China as the producer of Covid–19 and the Muslims of India as the provider also had significant dissemination (Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger in this issue).

Conclusion

The developments in South Asia do not support Žižek's expectation that neoliberal economies would collapse due to their own incompatibilities in handling the social demands raised by the Covid–19-pandemic. Nor are there convincing indicators of the appearance of a new, just, distributive, unified, welfare-oriented state anywhere in the world. We have seen that South Asia's neoliberal systems often delivered poorly during the Covid–19-pandemic, albeit somewhat differently in each country, but there are no indicators of a severe challenge to the extant neoliberal state. This does not mean that the many and sometimes violent social, ethnic and religious movements in South Asia have been eliminated. Not at all, but the different governmental systems seem to come out of the Covid–19-pandemic with a level of control that matches or even exceeds pre-pandemic times. Of course, neoliberalism-supporting regimes might be toppled at some point, and their handling of Covid–19 might be on the list of such a government's failings, but the neoliberal *state* is not under threat.

The governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan softened their control over civil society at the beginning of the pandemic, and one might have hoped this trendline would continue into an extended turn towards more open and inclusive societies. This does not seem to be

the case and, in this regard, we share some of Agamben's concerns. We do not foresee the introduction of a state of exception, but rather a return to the former level of restrictions on the civil society as imagined by Warraich on Pakistan, or perhaps a further dismantling of the institutions of governance, as feared by Tharoor for India. These are long-term developments where the pandemic enabled the governments to press towards various states of exception. Critical parts of civil society and the media will have to press for the upkeeping of the rule of law.

In this regard, it is relevant to consider the new ad hoc mobilisation of civil society during the Covid–19-pandemic. This may point toward new ways of action in the future.

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