Power to the People?
(Con-)Tested Civil Society in Search of Democracy

Edited by Heidi Moksnes and Mia Melin
Power to the People?

(Con-)tested civil society in search of democracy
Civil society’s
“crime against the state of Nicaragua”

Ola Segnestam Larsson

Abstract
The concept of civil society may seem to concern mainly researchers (cf Trägårdh 1999). However, conflict of interpretations” (Kristensson-Uggla 2006) of what constitutes civil society takes place not only between academics. At times, events in social life turn into a ‘clash of social structures’ among numerous actors in a society. The civil society’s alleged “crime against the State of Nicaragua”, as it was coined by the Public Prosecutor, Armando Juarez, in 2008 (cited in Envío 2008), could serve as an illustrative example of the latter.

On October 10, 2008, state prosecutors and police in Nicaragua raided the central offices of two civil society organisations, the Autonomous Women’s Movement (MAM) and the Center of Research for Communication (CINCO). As a result, all files, computers, and bookkeeping were removed from their offices. Officially investigating the “crime against the State of Nicaragua”, involving mainly alleged money laundering (Envío 2008), the public prosecutor called the event a raid to “find evidence” (as cited in Rogers 2008) to mount a case against primarily the two organisations. However, the raid was also regarded, in extension, part of mounting a case against 17 other civil society organisations, including international organisations such as Oxfam (UK) and Forum Syd (Sweden), suspected of the same crime (Rogers 2008).

In subsequent discussions among different social actors – including media, political parties, state representatives, and even international actors, such as Reporters Without Borders and the European Union – different explanations were offered as to what was going on and why the state of Nicaragua had launched the investigation. It was simultaneously argued that the events were part of a “campaign to criminalize feminism”
(according to a joint statement issued by women’s right activists, as cited in Rogers 2008), part of a “war of attrition” seeking to shift the focus of certain organisations from criticising the government to defending themselves (Envío 2008), and part of a legal operation to end “imperialism”, money laundering, and the “large businesses” of the Nicaraguan civil society (El 19 2008), among other arguments.

However, framing the events of 2008 more directly to the concept of civil society, I suggest that, at the core, the raid and the aftermath could better be interpreted as a clash of social structures, in which different sides of the clash sought to establish their specific understanding of the concept of civil society, including its social ramifications. The clash of social structures seemed in general to concern the idea of civil society as a space independent of the state and the market, and in particular if this space ought to be guaranteed from ‘above’ by the state, from the ‘outside’ with the support of external agents, or from ‘within’ the civil society itself (cf Pearce 2004).

References

Author affiliation
Åbo Akademi University, Åbo, Finland, and Ersta Sköndal University College, Sweden