

BOOK REVIEW by Barry D. Friedman

Ahmed, Shamima, and David M. Potter. *NGOs in International Politics*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2006. 285 pages. Paper, \$24.95.

In the book's foreword, political scientists Shamima Ahmed and David M. Potter promise "a comprehensive overview of the varieties of interaction between NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and states, between NGOs and international organizations, [and] among NGOs in international politics" (p. ix). They proceed to deliver an interesting, readable survey of the history of NGOs, the evolution of the missions and activities of those agencies, and the range of NGOs' goals and impacts today.

The authors describe how NGOs in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused on efforts to mitigate and eradicate disease, especially in impoverished societies, and on efforts to prevent or alleviate the suffering associated with warfare. Christian missionary roles (originating in the sixteenth century) expanded to encompass the delivery of medical services and medications. On the secular side, the Geneva-based International Red Cross fostered diplomatic proceedings that developed guidelines to de-legitimize warfare strategies that obstructed the efforts of medical services to treat wounded soldiers and civilians and that caused needless suffering for prisoners of war and civilian populations - hence, the Geneva Conventions.

Since the 1970s, the modern theme of NGOs can be described, in general terms, as the efforts of Northern-hemisphere activists to improve the quality of Southern-hemisphere life. While NGOs have a long history of providing disaster and famine relief, which they continue to do, these organizations have undertaken new tasks which include "roles centered around economic and social development; political roles such as advocacy (including lobbying), agenda setting, and public education; monitoring of international agreements; and, interacting with intergovernmental organizations..." (p.37). These new functions have elevated the nonprofit voluntary sector to a higher level of influence in international politics.

The unmistakably political emphasis of the modern NGO has prominent effects on international relations, the global economy, and the operations of national governments. There are a number of noteworthy aspects of this political machinery. NGOs, for example, expose the neglect of the poorest populations. "In the parlance of current scholarship, NGOs engage in naming, framing, blaming, and shaming" (p. 37). This frustrates the desire of many national governments to conceal the plight of their lowest socioeconomic classes. In addition, NGOs actively advocate for disadvantaged populations and lobby governments and international (government-sponsored) organizations (IGOs, such as the United Nations). Furthermore, NGOs network, and, through their information channels, disseminate data and commentary about problems that they want resolved. In so doing, these organizations pressure governments to live up to the commitments - concerning matters of equity and justice - to which those governments have previously committed themselves. They also engage in "public education and consciousness raising." As Ahmed and Potter write, "NGO mandates cover a broad spectrum and usually include outreach activities to educate local, national, or international governments and institutions. Indeed, NGOs' most important work may lie in the area of political socialization" (p. 46).

The authors observe that "issues like human rights, women's rights, and environmental protection that have dominated UN meetings/platforms did so mostly because of the active

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role of influential NGOs" (p. 82). Accordingly, national governments, IGOs, and multinational corporations find that their freedom to maneuver as they please may be constricted by the agitation of NGOs that spotlight ruthless or insensitive policies and behaviors. In multiple contexts, NGOs and their activities have become a noteworthy independent variable in the determination of what governments do and how they do it.

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