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CIVIL SOCIETY IN POLITICS AND SOUTHEAST ASIA IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Conceptual foundations

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In 2020, in the wake of the postponed election the previous year, and following the court-ordered dissolution of the popular opposition Future Forward Party, Thai students, queer activists, and thousands of others ratcheted up a litany of rallies and other protest actions, declaiming against the military-dominated government and demanding reforms to the heretofore sacrosanct monarchy. The following February, Myanmar's military likewise ousted the recently re-elected National League for Democracy-led government in a dramatic coup d'état. In response, not just party loyalists and organised activists, but also unprecedented numbers from among the general public joined street protests and a massive, sustained civil disobedience movement, defying both the army leadership and the still-acute COVID-19 pandemic. Six months later in Malaysia, youth activists took to the streets to oppose the 'back-door government' that had taken power in a February 2020 parliamentary/palace coup, struggled to stay afloat, then collapsed by August 2021, as well as its botched handling of the pandemic. These examples all illustrate the salience of civil society as a domain for political engagement outside the state and parties, across Southeast Asia – yet they are only extreme manifestations of this sphere's potency. However dominant the regimes and leaders of Southeast Asian states, civil society has been and remains a key part of even authoritarian polities in the region, allowing for fairly mundane advocacy efforts around single issues, enduring networks and coalitions, and more explosive scaling up across organisations, individuals, and media or other outlets.

Definitions of 'civil society' are rife. We take Jeffrey Alexander's (1993, 797) as a starting point: 'a richly evocative but undertheorized concept referring to the realm of interaction, institutions, and solidarity that sustains the public life of societies outside the worlds of economy and state'. The literature on civil society has drawn on earlier progenitors, including differing visions of Marx, Hegel, Gramsci, Parsons, and Habermas. But it really took off with efforts to explain how counterhegemonic, independent self-organisation in societies, characterised by 'self-limiting' ambitions (e.g. neither 'totalising' nor aiming to take political power), resulted in revolutions that overthrew authoritarian regimes – especially in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin

America in the 1970s and 1980s – and with the prevalence of struggles for rights and community mobilisation broadly in the then-advanced capitalist democracies (Walzer 1990; Cohen and Arato 1992; Alexander 1993).

Although never far from public attention, civil society as a space and platform has been inconsistently central to scholarly agendas. Relevant to any world region, this disparity is especially apparent in Southeast Asia: activism of all sorts claims headlines, confronts the full range of regimes, worries or enthuses political actors and observers, and offers hints of ideological and institutional developments to come – and yet academic research on this sphere tends towards episodic, ratcheting up upon notable outbursts, and uneven overall. Present trends region-wide towards varying mixes of autocratisation, populist politics, social polarisation, institutional decay, and innovative modes of engagement make the influence and relative resilience of differing segments within civil society all the more important: the most pressing developments in politics today, in Southeast Asia as elsewhere, are hardly confined to ‘formal’, let alone more narrowly electoral, politics.

Nevertheless, assumptions about what civil society *should* or *could* be, under ideal circumstances, lead scholars from across ideological perspectives to critique the concept as unhelpful or problematic, or as representing a domain too anaemic to be useful in Southeast Asia. Indeed, defining civil society could constitute a political project in itself. Culturalists argue that an essential predisposition of Asian societies towards political passivity precludes a mature civil society: if citizens are unwilling to rock the proverbial boat, the space of civil society loses relevance for politics and society in Southeast Asia. At the height of the ‘Asian values debate’ (see Bon and Wong, this volume), not only Asian and Western scholars, but also authoritarian political leaders concerned for their own dominance embraced the idea of a fundamentally different ‘Asian’ political culture.¹ In Asia, this line of critique is, at root, neo-Tocquevillian in its faulting a lack of *civic* engagement among the population at large, among societies daunted by repressive state tactics and/or content to leave governance to developmentalist technocrats. Indeed, instead of approximating ‘schools of democracy’, civil society organisations (CSOs) in such polities may reproduce authoritarian hierarchies and remain entrenched in clientelist structures of an oligarchic political system (Thapa 2016, 70–71). In contrast, liberals complain that there can be no civil society in at least most of Asia for lack of a space sufficiently autonomous from the state to qualify – neglecting the fact that this overlap is really the case everywhere. This perception embodies the conceptual confusion engendered by defining civil society as, by default, in opposition to ‘the state’ – an issue to which we return below – and often even more narrowly, as against or in support of a certain regime, whether authoritarian, democratic, or somewhere in between. Lastly, neo-Marxists carp that in a civil society dominated by capitalist relations and by middle class and business interests, managerial practices and organisational principles render civil society too ‘businessified’, depoliticised, and unrepresentative to qualify as valid (Hewison 2018). Academic criticisms against such ‘NGOisation’ even predated the actual efflorescence of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in Southeast Asia (Grey 1999; Ungpakorn 2007, 96–97).²

In fact, we find these concerns, across perspectives, to reflect a fundamental misconceptualisation: if we understand civil society as a *space* open to the full range of ideas and organisations, rather than as a set of organisations familiar in form and focus to development practitioners or others, we more accurately capture reality on the ground. Indeed, scholarly research on civil society in Southeast Asia has been conceptually ‘ahead’ of the wider literature in its scepticism of overly structural or narrow

expectations or theories. An ecumenical reading allows us still to critique civil society, but without missing or disregarding its potential to affect both societal and political change. Most obviously, neither democratisation nor its reversal can be understood without taking into account the role of civil society and its structuration along conflict lines specific to national contexts. Just one such dialectic: should frustrated progressives decamp from formal politics in a hybrid or authoritarian regime to civil society, they may not only see greater scope to pursue activist initiatives, but also, by giving up on holding the line within parties or state institutions, open the door wider to democratic backsliding or authoritarian retrenchment.

Nevertheless, the last book that comprehensively examined civil society in Southeast Asia and offered a theoretically driven, systematic, comparative analysis of state–civil society relations verges now on two decades old: Muthiah Alagappa's (2004a) *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*. Two central lenses and two central questions guided the analytical focus of a set of country-focused contributions, significantly orienting a generation of scholarship that followed (including some of the chapters here). Contributors engaged two lenses: *neo-Tocquevillian*, with the premise that where the state has high legitimacy and capacity, civil society tends to be self-limiting, channelling its claim-making through the political process; and *neo-Gramscian*, proposing instead that where the state is contested and/or society deeply divided, civil society tends towards conflictual, counterhegemonic, and zero-sum (Alagappa 2004b, 468–469). They probed, too, both whether civil society in Asia fosters or inhibits political change, and what the nature of civil society is across Asia's varying political contexts.

At the time of publication, Southeast Asia was, overall, experiencing an era of optimism. With a new 'people's constitution' adopted in the late 1990s, Thailand seemed irrevocably returned to civilian rule. However elite-led, the constitution-drafting process itself heralded the importance of civil society: members of CSOs participated actively and contributed information, influencing the draft (Shigetomi 2004, 300–302). Indonesia had successfully navigated a transition from authoritarianism in 1998–1999, and expanding efforts at mobilisation for political rights in political systems as diverse as Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Cambodia seemed harbingers of a liberalising future. Even so, case studies in Alagappa's volume recommended not presuming civil society's inherent democratic qualities or contribution to democratisation. As research on other regions concurs, civil society may be a source also of democratic decline and authoritarian reproduction (Wischermann et al. 2018). We take these premises very much to heart in the chapters to come.

Indeed, starting only about two years after the publication of Alagappa's seminal book, the tide turned across Southeast Asia. Crackdowns on CSOs and movements in a number of countries emerged almost simultaneously: repression of pro-democracy, labour-rights, anti-land-grabbing, and other organisations in Vietnam; a military coup d'état in Thailand, leading to more than a decade's military dictatorship; and a violent crackdown against the month-long 'Saffron Revolution' against dictatorship in Myanmar. Since then, despite some vacillations, the region has experienced overall a slow-boiling return to more authoritarian formal politics and, importantly, increasing restrictions – stemming from the state or from other social actors – on activist claims and efforts, as well as curbs on online and other political space. Accompanying (and at times furthering) this authoritarian trend, Southeast Asia has also seen a (re-)emergence of anti-democratic social movements and CSOs, making use of the same civil society space

they aim to delimit. Such CSOs have formed not only in undemocratic Thailand and Vietnam, but also in transitional Malaysia and ostensibly politically liberal Indonesia, the only country in the region besides tiny Timor-Leste in which democracy had, it seemed, steadily consolidated since the late 1990s.

Nonetheless, civil societies have continued to develop, thrive, diversify, institutionalise, and both bond and bridge communities across the region, however, limited the space they may occupy and scant the resources they enjoy (e.g. Thiem 2013; Hansson and Weiss 2018). Over the past two years, not just political machinations, including state efforts to co-opt promising agendas, but also the wrenching COVID-19 pandemic, have tested the capacity and influence of CSOs from across the tactical and ideological spectrum. But civil societies are clearly never just reflections of state action, nor of the concerns of the moment, however pressing. With increasing personal freedoms in some states, new constraints in others, persistent informal networks and clientelist holdovers in most, and enduringly complex interests and claims in all, overlapping obdurate institutional legacies, Southeast Asian civil societies are today characterised by a plurality of ideologies, aims, and strategies. These multivalent developments indicate a real need to reconsider civil society development in the region, including composition of this space, claims, resources, and potential to effect socio-political change. The chapters to come explore the nature and implications of civil society in Southeast Asia, not just offering empirical updates, but also teasing out conceptual frameworks and theoretical nuances.

We begin that process in this chapter, informed in key part by discussions over the course of an August 2021 conference, as states and societies in Southeast Asia – and indeed, globally – strained under the weight of an ongoing pandemic and its economic externalities. That extraordinary pressure, and the tensions it laid bare, lent motivation to a collective task of probing the qualities, boundaries, and characters of civil societies across the region. We start here with a working definition of civil society and sketch of its parameters and then offer a critical overview of its roots in the region. After setting the stage empirically, by identifying key turning points in the character of (and perspectives on) civil society in Southeast Asia, we conclude with an overview of the chapters to come.

Clarifying the concept of civil society

Two dimensions are most helpful in conceptualising civil society: the character of this sector and its placement within a polity.

What civil society is

The term *civil society* encompasses a broad swathe of political space. We understand civil society not only to include the gamut of social movements *but* also as more than that – and not with the specifically democratising aspect much of the literature suggests (e.g. Cohen and Arato 1992). Those movements and their constituent organisations, as well as activists who engage individually for collective ends, are not themselves the sum total of civil society; rather, they occupy, make use of, and sometimes reshape the space of civil society. By the same token, to prohibit groups from formally organising, or to oblige largely atomised activism rather than collective action does not preclude or kill off civil society; it may simply leave this space less well-populated (or less visibly so, if activists move underground), in ways consonant with the specific nature of repressive

measures and the wider socio-political context (Boudreau 2004). Even formally authoritarian states, with only very few exceptions, allow ‘formally autonomous organizations engaging in activities beyond the direct control of the state’: organisations *not* specifically aimed at checking or resisting the state, but coexisting with it (Lewis 2013, 325), or whose activities threaten neither the political regime itself nor ‘national security’ as ruling elites define it (Kerkvliet 2019). This sphere sustains both comparatively benign ‘self-organisation’ and ‘production of counter-discourses’ – and it is the more threatening, less co-optable, or usefully legitimating latter effort that authoritarian states will be especially keen to repress (Lewis 2013, 326). Still, authoritarian rulers – for instance, in Southeast Asia’s ‘market Leninist’ states (London 2014) – tend towards a broad brush in painting self-organisation and broad collective action as threatening, regardless of the issues around which people mobilise.³

For any government, certain issues and claims are more problematic than others. All are concerned with regime-challenging activism and mobilisation (and many are prepared to suppress or obstruct such groups, organisations, and activities), but we note patterns in Southeast Asia of activities prone to incur such sanction. Most obviously, governments across the region have been inclined to suppress ‘left leaning’ activities, or activities they perceive as challenging state-defined developmentalist goals – for instance, independent or self-organised workers, farmers, and land-rights organisations (Deyo 1989; Hewison and Rodan 1996);⁴ antagonistic anti-corruption efforts (Chen and Weiss 2020); and environmental activism (Hirsch and Warren 1998).⁵ Organisations and movements that governments (or empowered social actors) deem threatening to prevailing norms or interests, such as women’s or sexuality-rights organisations, have also been targeted, much as in other regions (e.g. Rothschild 2005; Weiss 2013). Such exclusions clearly structure civil society. For instance, developmentalist authoritarian regimes may permit the self-organisation and relative autonomy of manufacturers and other business interests but not allow independent trade unions or labour-rights NGOs, unavoidably altering the balance of power among CSOs. We see, too, common predilections across states towards targeted repression of mobilisation around ‘macro rights’, or the right to have rights, even when governments tolerate or even encourage more narrowly pitched issue-based activism.⁶

All told, we find a wide range of scales and forms of regulation and repression of the space and occupants of civil society across the region. The continuum extends from a state highly accepting of associational life (except in its ‘uncivil’ variants; more on those below) in the Philippines (long known for its especially dense, diverse mass of CSOs) and post-New Order Indonesia; to more regulated or controlled, but still open and active organisations in, for instance, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore; to largely suppressed mobilisation in Laos and Vietnam.

Common parlance – and the democratisation literature in particular – tends to frame civil society as though naturally inclined towards liberalism. John Hall (1995, 26–27) explains bluntly, ‘we value democracy in large part because we expect it to be married to civil society’. Yet repression aside, civil society is neither exclusively pro-democracy nor pro-human rights: groups from across the ideological spectrum may occupy, thinly or densely, the space of civil society. To understand any CSO or movement’s implications for democracy, we need to grasp what ideas and motivations drive its efforts, its participants’ worldview and ideology, where it fits among the power relations in civil society, its connection with political parties (apart from under the region’s *de jure* or *de facto* single-party regimes), and how such connections translate into influence on ‘formal’ politics.

Nor should civil society be understood as a domain only of inclusivity, universal discourses, or solidarity; ‘primordiality and exclusion’ are equally present and salient in both democratic and non-democratic societies (Alexander 1993, 802). Indeed, not only does civil society ‘not always equal democratisation’, but also CSOs may actually thrive under non-democratic rule (Toepler et al. 2020, 652). Some CSOs may prefer to remain apolitical and simply focus on service-provision and similar functions; others may support an authoritarian regime’s ideology or leadership (Toepler et al. 2020, 652–653). Indeed, famously, in the case of Nazi Germany, a dense civil society helped produce one of the most repressive and dangerous regimes in human history (Berman 1997). The fault-lines and conflict that mix may spark or sustain within civil society not only reflect patterns within the larger society but may also generate ideas, ideologies, and possibilities for mobilisation. This spatial and ideologically polyglot character of civil society comes through clearly in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian experience suggests a less equitable, open, and autonomous civil society than key theorists have proposed. Habermas is exemplary in defining the ‘public sphere’, a related, though ‘not precisely equivalent’ concept (Calhoun 1993, 269), influential for contemporary approaches to civil society, as:

... first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body ... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest ... We speak of the political public sphere in contrast, for instance, to the literary one, when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state. Although state authority is so to speak the executor of the political public sphere, it is not a part of it.

(Habermas 1974, 49)

His premises – the historical antecedents he highlights – are liberal constitutions that emerged starting in the 18th century, in which society secured ‘a sphere of private autonomy’, and private individuals were guaranteed a channel to ‘transmit the needs of bourgeois society to the state’ for more ‘rational’ authority, with ‘the restriction of public [state] authority to a few functions’ (Habermas 1974, 52–53). Moreover, it is largely thanks to Habermas – his work on the public sphere, and on new social movements as concerning ‘communicative spheres of action’ and ‘revitalization of buried possibilities for expression and communication’ (Habermas 1981, 33, 36) – that a focus on discourse marks much of this literature. We deem discourse important, but not more defining in practice than other dimensions.

More to the point, the ideal-typical public sphere Habermas suggests is very far from Southeast Asian realities. Instead, we find civil societies typically structured by context-specific cleavages that divide or bind citizens, and by ‘categorical inequalities’ based on ethnicity, economy, class, gender, geography, and more (Tilly 2003) that grant some individuals or groups access to deliberations and exclude others. Habermas’s conceptualisation understates power, including such differential access, as a structuring factor and downplays contentious views, conflict and contradiction as intrinsic to deliberation

(Fraser 1990). We argue instead for the centrality of such inequalities to organisation and mobilisation in civil societies in contemporary Southeast Asia, and that *both* conflict *and* cooperation characterise civil society and the public sphere here, as do context-specific patterns of power and domination.

In line with breadth of motivations and modes, we find across Southeast Asia, too, a wide array of activist tactics. Unlike much of the literature on civil society, we deem it analytically unhelpful to exclude ‘uncivil society’, or groups that (generally partially and/or episodically) make use of violent means of protest (see especially Kreuzt’s chapter here). Scholars tend to see uncivil society as embodying something quite separate from the peaceable, rule-bound (however provocative), and civic virtues producing civil society, notwithstanding the ‘contentious politics’ school’s effort to put collective mobilisation from petitions to revolts on a single axis (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Reflecting on Southeast Asian experience, we move beyond Tocquevillian assumptions of pro-democratic, peaceful, inclusively solidaristic mobilisation, to include that full range. As Garry Rodan (2022, 11) explains, ‘if we define away all forces and values hostile to democracy – even where they act in a constitutional and non-violent manner – we limit our capacity to comprehend some of the most significant political associations and ideologies engaged in struggles to reshape and/or defend existing state power relationships in contemporary Southeast Asia – and elsewhere’. Moreover, just as we do not exclude groups whose toolbox extends beyond civil means of engagement, nor do we exclude groups that, when not advocating for interests or otherwise mobilising, pursue profit: associations of businesses and networks can occupy the space of civil society, even if component firms are not exclusively within that domain (see especially Tans’ chapter). In some polities where registration rules for CSOs are strongly restricted, NGOs may also register as businesses to circumvent hassle and surveillance.

We have presented civil society thus far as essentially domestic, except, perhaps, inasmuch as its organisations engage with inherently border-crossing colonial empires. The common framing of civil society as defined in opposition to the state reifies that conceptualisation, though a growing literature addresses transnational civil society (for instance, Avenell and Ogawa 2022). With organisational growth during and after the Cold War, however, other transnational aspects became increasingly apparent and salient. It was and remains primarily local governing apparatuses that have regulated this space: domination, power, and governance do remain fundamentally domestic. Yet, for instance, the Cold War operated also at the level of civil society, with duelling blocs of labour unions (Wehrle 2005; Tan 2018; Leow 2019) and students’ organisations (Stern 1967; Altbach 1970), forging or fortifying regional or global networks; after the Cold War, international donor efforts to build civil society have cultivated similar links. Those efforts have spanned from development assistance channelled through domestic NGOs, in line with prevailing donor strategies, to democracy assistance funnelled to local pro-democracy groups, to open or underground rights-advocacy organisations, working either in the language of international norms or with vernacularised variants (Bon and Wong, this volume). Importantly, some such efforts affirmed a subterranean dimension to the space of civil society, particularly in outright non-democracies.

Nor is the transnational aspect of civil society merely a matter of external tentacles’ reaching into domestic space. Even well before the current era of globalisation, we have seen proactive efforts across Southeast Asia (and in other world regions) to develop and join solidaristic or coordinated campaigns for goods and goals germane beyond any one state.

Where civil society is

That issue of relative boundedness brings us to our second core consideration: the placement of civil society – and here we diverge to an extent from much of the literature. Discussions of civil society, drawing on Gramsci and his progeny, present a triptych of civil society, political society, and economic society (Adamson 1987/1988, 322–323), and present civil society as engaged overwhelmingly vis-à-vis a distinct political society: the state apparatus, as well as political parties, and politicians. In practice, this mapping generates a shorthand assumption of a state–civil society dichotomy, which we find to be unhelpful.⁷ These spheres do differ in their purposes and objectives, but they overlap, on the one hand, and they operate both singly and interactively, on the other. To wit, civil societal actors may work within and around the formal state and vice-versa (Kerkvliet, Heng, and Koh 2003; Wells-Dang 2013) – and these actors and their organisations depend to some degree on state laws and regulations (Bobbio 1989) – but their engagement may serve to legitimate both state and supra-state organisations (Uhlín, this volume), notwithstanding common assumptions of civil society’s necessary autonomy from the state (Diamond 1996, 228). Our point here is not to say that some actors within civil society could not be poised against the state or a specific government, or engaged in struggle against a political regime, whether authoritarian or democratic (e.g. Thayer 2009); indeed, civil society space is often where such reformist ideas emerge and organisation and mobilisation around them develops. We caution, too, against eliding *state* and *regime*, for nor do the experiences of civil society in Southeast Asia embody an inherent struggle against an overbearing state per se, as so much liberal theorising on civil society assumes. Political civil society actors may agitate against, and struggle to de-legitimise, a political regime or a specific government, but rarely the state.

The potential for entanglement goes further, muddying the conceptual waters. Authoritarian regimes may form their own NGO-mimicking organisations (often termed government-organised NGOs, GONGOs) or seek to permeate civil society by sponsoring think tanks or other organisations tethered to developmentalist bureaucracies. Such organisations might contribute technocratic expertise to policy-making processes or simply ‘legitimise and consolidate existing regimes or leaders, as well as the developmental state narrative’ (Nachiappan, Mendizabal, and Datta 2010, 24). Meanwhile, in line with the strategic toleration noted earlier, some parts of civil society may develop purposefully anodyne service-providing non-profits (to borrow terminology drawn largely from US tax codes) or, conversely, ‘align with authoritarian regimes on grounds of religious or nationalistic values’ (Toepler et al. 2020, 649) that may seed uncivil action. This mix of CSOs factors into functions of ‘legitimation, repression and co-optation’, the three ‘pillars of authoritarian rule’ (Toepler et al. 2020, 649). While service-providers risk co-optation and depoliticisation, loyal NGOs that support the regime may provide counter-narratives against Western values (and sometimes services, too); it is primarily those within the subset of claims-making NGOs that irk regimes by ‘pushing largely liberal, Western values and rights-based agendas’ (Toepler et al. 2020, 651–652).

The state aside, actors from civil society may engage also with the third sphere, economic society, however underplayed in the literature – for instance, via forms of labour mobilisation (Caraway, this volume); by CSOs’ challenging business firms and their leaders; or in the form of advocacy among the profit-oriented businesses, organised in interest-driven associations, that Tans’ chapter addresses. Or CSOs’ efforts may focus

really on society itself, as by pursuing ‘expressive’ goals of recognition, apart from or in lieu of ‘instrumental’ policy objectives (Bernstein 2008). Importantly, as well, the state and its coercive forces are not the only source of repression; civil society actors themselves may suppress, police, and delimit others’ political space (e.g. Gamson 1997).

In this sense, framing the state as essentially tantamount to political society at least implies that ‘formal politics’ *is* politics, whereas civil society, as the domain of ‘non-institutional politics’ (Offe 1985), is secondary or peripheral. Given the potential for dynamics of contestation and control within civil society, as well as the syncretic relationship among spheres, we frame civil society as an essential component of ‘politics’ across regime types; to avoid semantic confusion with ‘political society’, we thus down-play the three-spheres framing.

A final caveat: part of the impact protest may have is not only on society and state, but also on the individuals and groups that take part. We can thus not only think of the place of civil society vis-à-vis the balance of the polity – but also the place of individuals relative to the space of civil society. At one level, the experience of collective action shapes the sense of common cause conducive to further efforts, through negotiated “social construction” of the “collective”; participants create and internalise a collective identity, understood ‘as a system of relations and representations’ (Melucci 1995, 44, 50). At a deeper level, too, participants may come within civil society to share a new disposition as proper political agents rather than as ruled-over subjects and, in their deliberations with others, may revise ‘their own understanding of both their individual self-interest and the public interest, and both together’ (Pitkin 2004, 338, 340). By ‘seeing themselves in collective action’, Hanna Pitkin (2004, 341) asserts, ‘they observe their own power and their shared power’. Pattana Kitiarsa’s ethnographic research in Thailand, for instance, demonstrates that some protesters did not join protests to ‘make a revolution’, but as they participated in repeated actions, they became increasingly aware of their rights and position, of the injustices they experienced, and of political action as a way to rectify matters (Pattana 2012).

The origins of civil society in Southeast Asia

The social movements and other collective initiatives that occupy contemporary civil society took deep root and thrived with economic liberalisation and the population movements, as well as transformations of interests and affiliations, it wrought. CSOs and the scope of civil society itself have expanded greatly especially since the Cold War ended, their growth accelerated in part in many regions of the world (including Southeast Asia) by foreign development aid. Still, in earlier times, we might still speak of religious or occupational groups, for instance, as occupying civil society, even if with generally lesser political capacity or ambition.

Civil society has a long historical trajectory in Southeast Asia, although the label, in English or local languages, took firm hold really only in the latter decades of the 20th century (Weiss 2008). By the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, most countries of the region supported what would now be considered CSOs. Furthermore, already by this time, cosmopolitan elites travelled the world and brought back ideas about civic and political rights, democracy, and equality (Anderson 2007). By the 1920s–1930s, along with nascent parties and other formal-political organisations, lively clusters of women’s organisations, trade unions, political publications, and more were developing (see e.g. Marr 1976; Peycam 2012; Tran 2013, [Chapters 1 and 2](#)).

Motivating these sometimes cosmopolitan groups were a broad range of ideological perspectives – republicanism, liberalism, Marxist-Leninism, monarchism, Islamism, and more (Sidel 2021) – as well as competing visions of a ‘good society’, state–society relations, state–citizen relations, and so forth. Dominating civil societies across most of the region, however, were anti-colonial national liberation movements and organisations, themselves far from uniform in their ideologies, structures, and strategies. The institutional legacies of some of these groups persist today, in political parties or religious, advocacy, and other CSOs.

Reflecting this history, throughout this volume, we understand the space of civil society to predate its being named as such. Nationalist groups may not have seen themselves as part of a ‘civil society’, nor might European or Japanese colonial apparatuses have recognised this sphere (or indeed space for indigenous politics at all), but structurally, the space in which these initiatives transpired *was* that of civil society – implying yet another reason not to feel overly bound to define civil society vis-à-vis a state, rather than simply on its own merits.

Political turning points

Not only shifts in the composition and mix of CSOs, but also in perspectives on civil society, reflect broader political changes. Actors from civil society have played momentous roles in the region, but periodically. That these turning points often occur in sync across several states in the region reflects not just the interconnectedness of Southeast Asian politics, but also underlying socioeconomic fault lines that traverse the region. Our goal here is not to offer a country-by-country sketch, but to identify a few especially important *regional* turning points, especially sparked by common shocks. Although the chapters that follow home in substantially on 21st-century civil society, recent and current developments obviously build on the structural and normative foundations previous developments established.

The first such shock, and the period it shaped, was arguably the most formative, not just for the shape and character of civil society: the syndrome of World War II, the Japanese occupation, and the decolonisation that followed in the 1940s–1950s. The shift from a colonial to postcolonial framework inherently altered the position and potential of local organisations and activists. In ‘the West’, a bourgeoisie that emerged with capitalist expansion essentially toppled feudal orders. However, not only did colonial states in most of Southeast Asia coexist with and make political and economic use of feudal elites, but also capitalist development was tied tightly to that state, which allowed very little space for the development of an ‘independent’ bourgeoisie. What defined early movements and organisations in Southeast Asia was often, therefore, resistance to repressive colonial domination and feudalism, along with broader struggles over citizenship and inclusion. The onset of the Cold War in the midst of that ferment affected civil societies in profound ways, especially as the assumptions of ‘domino theory’ translated into broad repression of political dissent (Hansson, Hewison, and Glassman 2020).

Even in this inhospitable context, CSOs continued to evolve. The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of important student movements and other, often left-leaning, activism, from Saigon, to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Jakarta. A backlash against these largely urban-based initiatives against dictatorships and for justice and political rights led, in several instances, to further restrictions on the space for civil society activism and organisation. Moreover, this anti-leftist action primed societies for the

further concentration and consolidation of political power – which contemporaneous elites commonly saw as a prerequisite for economic development. Importantly, though, these early episodes of mobilisation laid a structural and normative foundation for later activism and organisation.

Next came the reconfiguring disruption of the developmentalist heydays of the 1980s. This period generated expectations of and roles for functional, non-ideological NGOs – even as growing middle classes fostered the same sort of identity-based ‘new social movements’ that thrived in other world regions (Offe 1985; Buechler 1995). Southeast Asian leaders keen to replicate the first movers of the ‘flying geese’ formation (Akamatsu 1962) idealised technocratic leadership, insulated from popular pressure. This process overlapped with a global neoliberal shift, which encouraged the crafting, expansion, and support of a developmentalist civil society as a way to facilitate mandated structural-adjustment programmes and the ‘roll back’ of the state (Beckman 1993). Funding initiatives for developmentalist NGOs to provide services ranging from supplying potable water to offering English classes in rural communities permeated and redirected local civil societies. International financial institutions and bilateral aid programmes supported the development of suitably apolitical CSOs – not those they considered expressions of ‘special interests’, such as trade unions – to partner in this work.

But the state’s insulation also isolated it from the wider society. While international actors supported technocratic strong-man leadership, pressures for change ratcheted upwards in several countries in the region. Western international policy elites who saw in the end of the Cold War the ‘end of history’ now re-emphasised support for civil society, in the belief that a dense civil society would have inherently democratising effects. Programmes for international democracy-promotion intensified, focused substantially on expanding, but not necessarily democratising, civil society. An NGO sector financially dependent on external sources, and generally chary of issues or fields that their governments might deem threatening or ‘sensitive’, thrived in several states in the region.

The third shock, the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s, not only sparked an immediate wave of efforts at systemic political reform in Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia in particular but also laid the ground for a wider transformation in civil society in the decade that followed. In the wake of that trauma, in the mid-2000s, massive popular protests shook multiple counties: Malaysia’s Bersih movement for electoral reform, Thailand’s pro-democratic (and pro-Thaksin Shinawatra) ‘red-shirts’ and royalist ‘yellow-shirts’, massive land and labour protests in Cambodia and Vietnam, ongoing disputes over the direction of democratisation in Indonesia, and monk-led mass protests in Myanmar. What ignited activism across contexts differed, but the protests shared a focus at least in part on economic and political inequality, reflecting common roots, at least indirectly (and in some cases, umbilically) in the effects of the financial crisis of the late 1990s; all, too, opened space for other identities to press their interests, directed towards both society and their governments. These efforts triggered not just positive reforms and gains, in some cases, but also conservative anti-democratic counter-movements, seeding much of the polarisation we see today (for instance, Ufen, this volume). This activism also gave rise to a plethora of new, smaller organisations and revivification or retuning of ‘old’ organisations, such as the ‘Octobrists’, or former left-wing students in the struggles of the 1970s (especially October 1973 and 1976), in Thailand (Kanokrat 2016), as fresh shoots emerged around the fringes of broader movements.

The longstanding conflicts that took public expression in and around the mid-2000s remain unresolved today; indeed, most have since been exacerbated. The divisions, organisations, movements, and ideas that germinated then arguably laid the ground for current movements and counter-movements in Southeast Asia – our final key turning point. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated trends already crystallising: virtually all political regimes in the region are currently drifting towards autocracy, as democracy recedes, fails to consolidate, or slips further from reach, all the more so with pandemic-driven securitisation (Supalak 2020; Azmil and Por 2020; Hupal 2021; Mietzner 2020, 2021). Amid those shifts, the space of civil society, echoing that of formal politics, has grown more heatedly polarised rather than merely plural and contentious.

We see not only cognate strategies, perhaps extending to efforts at mimicry, among protesters, but also ‘autocratic learning’ among states (often with counter-protesters’ enthusiastic backing): would-be authoritarians emulate their counterparts’ successful strategies to stay in power and to prevent regime change, such as through controlling the internet and social media. Social-media platforms and other multinational corporations may collaborate with such regimes (even as activists find other online venues and spaces), encouraging such ‘learning’. For example, we see cognate legislative efforts and policy changes, extending to joint policies to prevent pro-democratic ‘colour revolutions’ (as in Europe or North Africa) from developing in the region and challenging existing political regimes. Those efforts extend even to open intergovernmental collaboration – a joint Chinese and Cambodian government think tank, for instance – to investigate such campaigns and prevent them from taking root (Rathavong 2017). Furthermore, in some countries in the region, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, ruling parties have revived Cold War concepts and labels to describe the threat they see to their own political future, from civil society and from within the formal political system itself. Propaganda, party-supported research, and official media warn against ‘dark forces’ that aim to use the ‘guise of civil society’ and being ‘pro-democracy’ to attack the political regime, while new party regulations have specified signs of ‘peaceful evolution’ in order to weed out elements with such inclinations from within the ruling party apparatus and civil society.⁸

At the same time, pro-democratic civil society is probably more determined, if not stronger, than ever, in the face of emerging threats and as ‘Generation Z’ activists bring other identities and issues into the public sphere, as more fully part of local struggles (claims regarding gender, sexuality, environment and climate, etc.). Transnational alliances among likeminded CSOs have made headway, too. For instance, the social-media-based ‘Milk Tea Alliance’ emerged in 2020 among pro-democracy and rights-advocacy groups and individuals in several countries across the region; among other campaigns, the Alliance supported cross-national protests and rallies in solidarity with the civil disobedience movement in Myanmar and against the military coup d’état. The tensions that give rise to these efforts and the doggedness of state resistance, though, not only broaden the scope of current movements but perhaps also widen polarisation and foment new divisions in civil society.

What we contribute

Attention to the diversity of Southeast Asian experience not only deepens our empirical knowledge of Southeast Asia but also shifts the theoretical frame. Seminal works on Latin America, Africa, and Europe largely laid the conceptual ground for how scholars and practitioners have approached civil society. Notwithstanding important turns in

social-movement (and later contentious politics) scholarship towards questions of identity, smaller bore policy advocacy, ideologically conservative mobilisation, and so forth, much of the foundational work on civil society writ large really focuses on pro-democratic regime change and the liberalising potential of civil society. Scholars addressed a gamut of cases (though Southeast Asian ones were not prominent among them) to probe the role, character, and scope of civil society and the engagement it hosts, but especially the then-newly post-communist states that emerged with the fall of the Soviet Union, or Latin American and African states in and after transitions from different forms of authoritarianism or dominant-party rule (among many others, Alvarez 1990; Chazan 1992; Weigle and Butterfield 1992; Oxhorn 1994; Dryzek 1996; Ekiert and Kubik 1998). (Work on the Middle East and North Africa – the ‘Muslim world’ – lagged but still made its mark; for instance, Norton 1995/1996.) Of course, Southeast Asia not been immune, too, either to pro-democracy social-movement campaigns, successful or otherwise, or to analyses of these and what they tell us about civil society (e.g. Hikam 1996; Jones 1998; Hedman 2001; Weiss 2006). Even so, works on the region do present a far wider range of reforms to which civil society may contribute.

In part, what distinguishes Southeast Asia most obviously is that democratic capacity has never been high in the region, however much it now is shrinking. All the chapters here are in some way informed by notable trends of democratic erosion or autocratisation in the region and understand civil society space as, if not actively dwindling, then at least precariously pressed by illiberal or anti-democratic forces. We find then not only the paradox of constrained space for civil society, but also highly consequential engagement within that narrow space, complementing or supplementing lack of democratic space also in formal politics (even in the region’s closest-to-liberal democracies). In fact, the sorts of shifts we see in Southeast Asia – for instance, increasing polarisation not just in formal politics, but also in the informal politics of civil society – along with our approach of conceptualising civil society as a space rather than a set of structures, resonate anywhere. Furthermore, an ecumenical lens not only on what structural forms might occupy civil society, but also on normative or ideological starting points, as well as tactics and strategies activists adopt, presents a broadly germane reconceptualisation. The role of CSOs as partners to political parties, government agencies, and international organisations, for instance, is not only unmissable in Southeast Asia but also warrants greater attention, and being ‘counted’ as properly within civil society, in other regions.

The chapters to come interrogate, apply, and extend these concepts and frameworks. We divide the chapters into five sections, for heuristic purposes: spaces and platforms, place within politics, resources and tactics, identity formation and claims, and advocacy. Some of the chapters home in on a single country; others address two, several, or the region as a whole. None, of course, aspires to be the last word on the topic it broaches. Indeed, research on civil society in Southeast Asia, while developing and diversifying in recent years, is still very much in its infancy, particularly in the several countries in the region where such work risks branding as ‘sensitive’ and potentially subversive. It is our hope that this volume will contribute inspiration for continued enquiry, and for scholarly as well as activist engagement.

Structure of the volume

We begin in [Part I](#) with spaces and platforms of civil society in Southeast Asia. Merlyna Lim kicks off the discussion with an examination of the internet and social media as platforms for action, available across the gamut of movements. Emerging media have

always, Lim argues, attracted controversy and debate; the latest variants, like their predecessors, offer utility to advance progressive and regressive interests alike. As she details, however, the specific types of platforms that social media provide have fostered shifts in the character of political discourse, important not only for electoral competition, but also for civil society. From media, we turn to the arts with Minna Valjakka's chapter. She examines the arts as not only political (as well as embroiled in markets and other institutions and communities), but as also deeply salient to civil society. Installations and other artistic productions disseminate information, raise awareness, and encourage socio-political action – and also have, and gain attention and credence from, aesthetic value. Her chapter examines artists working in challenging circumstances in Myanmar and Singapore, and to the networks through which their works circulate, to see these dynamics in action.

Delving into Southeast Asia's increasingly dense and expansive urban spaces, Rita Padawangi recommends that we shift our lens on civil society and mobilisation to give spatial perspectives their due. She examines cities as both sites and foci of mobilisation. Through case studies of a fraught electoral contest in Jakarta and of housing-rights activism, she demonstrates both how inherently political urban space is, and what we miss analytically if we fail to appreciate local-level mobilisation and resistance against structural subordination. As with several other chapters in the volume, Padawangi addresses how extractive development models that governments and private-sector allies have pursued in the Southeast Asian region contribute to setting limits to who can participate in civil society but, at the same time, spawn counter-movements, especially when formal political avenues appear limited.

We turn then to Ward Berenschot and Adriaan Bedner, who examine the range of strategies glossed as legal mobilisation, to understand the scope not only for its pursuit, but also for its success, across the region. They start by sketching and comparing legal opportunity structures, or the conditions that make legal mobilisation more or less likely to prove effective. Their analysis of legal mobilisation around land conflicts in Indonesia and the Philippines, and labour rights in Malaysia and Thailand, finds NGOs across these cases reluctant to turn to the courts – notwithstanding fairly different conditions and openings across states – and courts and legislatures, hence, unlikely to feel especially pressured to reform.

Part II takes us to the nexus of civil society and formal politics, across regime types, both domestic and transnational. First, Andreas Ufen explores the role of civil society in regime transitions, by comparing the political salience of civil society in Indonesia and Malaysia over time. In particular, he traces the efforts and impacts of 'uncivil' or anti-pluralist actors in making use of civil society space and how that affects democratic or democratising states. This examination makes clear how ambiguous CSOs' political roles may be: they may push against, or for authoritarianism, and may present quite different visions of the common good.

Continuing in this vein – and like Ufen, taking as starting point a critical review of the democratisation literature and what it understates or misses – Kristian Stokke homes in on the complex, disheartening case of Myanmar. He traces and assesses Myanmar's vacillation between military rule and (limited) democracy, and the sorts of mobilisation that occurred within civil society at and between each phase. This examination draws attention to the different mix of organisational forms and objectives active at different stages, culminating in the current upsurge and impact of novel initiatives for mass mobilisation in the anti-coup Spring Revolution.

Anders Uhlin's chapter scales our inquiry up to the regional level, to assess civil society as a component of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) landscape. His analysis distinguishes among substantive legitimation, delegitimation, and symbolic legitimation as objectives or end-results of engagement. Uhlin finds that while civil societal activists do approach ASEAN and engage as they might, their efforts ultimately convey primarily symbolic legitimacy: they neither result in substantive change nor delegitimize the regional body.

In [Part III](#), we examine resources and tactics available for civil societal mobilisation. Rosalia Sciortino details the mechanics, strengths, and fault-lines in how CSOs secure funding in an increasingly challenging resource environment, both domestic and internationally. More than that, though, she makes a case for the imperative of ensuring more solid and sustainable financial footing for civil society, both to bolster democracy and good governance, and to redress socioeconomic inequities that the COVID-19 pandemic has made all the more apparent and dire.

Astrid Norén-Nilsson moves the focus to questions of leadership in civil society – a critically important resource and perspective, as she explains, but one that scholarship on civil society tends to neglect. Looking both broadly across Southeast Asia and more closely at Cambodian civil society, she examines the role of leaders, and of the study of leadership in disentangling, the relationship among grassroots, CSOs, and state. She probes, too, the roots and emergence of civil society leadership, how sphere-spanning elite networks operate, and what closer consideration of leaders reveals about the workings and scope of civil society.

Next in this discussion of resources and tactics, complicating the common view of civil society as a space for nonviolent activism, Joakim Kreutz scrutinises the appeal and potential of violent strategies. Acknowledging the lack of a clear distinction between 'civil' and 'uncivil' organisations, he seeks to trace when and why CSOs in Southeast Asia resort to violence rather than limiting themselves to nonviolent strategies. He finds that organisations do not move frequently or so readily between modes: radicalisation and de-escalation both may happen, and CSOs think carefully about their strategic choices, but switching modes is challenging. The extent and character of government repression is especially salient to CSOs' decision to adopt violent means directly or through alliance with violent actors, but so is protestors' assessment of the odds that nonviolence may succeed.

With [Part IV](#), we shift to collective-identity formation and claims around these identities. Duanghathai Buranajoenkij examines mobilisation by and for women and questions of gender, focusing on Thailand. Her historically grounded analysis charts change over time not only in women's groups' membership, foci, and objectives, but also of different ways in which activists have pursued feminist agendas – including via broader political movements. Even as she notes the emergence of a promising new young-feminist movement, however, she acknowledges how persistent and problematic issues of sexism and sexual harassment remain, including within activist communities. And she examines, too, the propensity for instrumental state use of feminist ideas and women's groups as a legitimating strategy.

Helle Rydström, Hương Thu Nguyễn, and An Ngọc Hoàng next delve into Vietnam, to detail the character of an emergent LGBT movement there. They explain the extent to which activists have pushed back against 'misrecognition' of LGBT individuals in Vietnam, starting with the state's designation of homosexuality as a 'social evil' in the mid-1980s. Those efforts at securing official recognition and toleration have made

remarkable headway, especially in contrast to developments in most of the region. Much as Duangthai assesses state co-optation of a women's rights agenda in Thailand, they acknowledge an element of 'pinkwashing', or of the state's strategic concessions on LGBT rights-claims in a bid to appear 'progressive' on an international stage. Nonetheless, they see real advances in Vietnam, not just in terms of state policies, but also in the form of an increasingly organised and mobilised LGBT movement within civil society.

Shifting to questions of ethnicity and indigeneity, Jacques Bertrand and Cheng Xu examine how these identity claims undergird distinct patterns of mobilisation. Indigenous claim-making, they argue, is a subset of ethnic claim-making; what distinguishes these categories is less the actual indigeneity of a given group than the claims groups present. Indigenous claims tend towards 'defensive localism' shaped by both global and domestic norms and laws, seldom pitched towards broad coalitions, and less threatening to states than ethnic claims: indigenous mobilisation focuses more often on local self-determination than on capturing state power. Ethnic claims, in contrast, may include demands for territorial autonomy or independence; as such, states find these claims harder to accommodate. They develop their analysis with reference to indigenous and ethnic mobilisation in Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Closing out this section, Carlo Bonura's chapter examines what he terms 'religious civil society', in terms of its distinctive spatial and, especially, normative aspects in Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist societies across Southeast Asia. Religion has been and remains highly important to socio-political life throughout the region, in complex and varied ways. Southeast Asian states intervene notably in questions of religion; religious institutions may be unable to maintain autonomy. That intervention carries implications not only for the structure and character of religiously grounded associational life, but also for the normative resources – worldviews and principles that help shape individuals' political views, policy preferences, and behaviour vis-à-vis the state – religion provides within a given context. Even so, religious organisations, identities, and ideas have long played, and still perform, key roles in the gamut of civil societal initiatives, from policy advocacy to mass mobilisations, region-wide.

Lastly, [Part V](#) explores sectoral or issue-based advocacy. Teri Caraway starts us off by considering organised labour, a potentially especially potent segment of civil society. The existing literature captures better how CSOs other than unions mobilise in the face of threat. Considering pushback from civil society broadly, but especially from organised labour specifically, against autocratisation in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar, she asks what accounts for variations in how strongly labour mobilised. The answer, she suggests, lies less in the character of labour mobilisation prior to the autocratic turn than in the nature of the regime change itself: a sudden turn is more likely to stimulate aggressive resistance than a more incremental transition.

From labour, we turn to business associations, with Ryan Tans' chapter. These little-studied associations, he suggests, comprise 'contingent civil society', overlapping the latter sphere under delimited circumstances. His analysis challenges a prevailing reading of Southeast Asian business as essentially rent-seeking rather than entrepreneurial, oligarchic, and/or state-connected and suggests the extent to which businesses, like other actors, may seek to augment their power through collective action. Especially important in predicting when, and understanding why and how, businesses engage civil society, he suggests, are the relative structural power and entrepreneurial premise of their members.

Edmund Bon Tai Soon and Wong Pui Yi examine the processes by which human rights activists translate norms and claims for local relevance, or vernacularisation. Specifically, they home in on how human-rights organisations focused on legal mobilisation and protections, with a primary case of Malaysia's LoyalBurok (and offshoot Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights) and secondary focus on Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Jakarta (Legal Aid Institute Jakarta) in Indonesia, pursue cause lawyering and broader rights-focused social mobilisation. The different institutional and socio-political contexts in which these groups function shape each group's approach in important ways – from how they are organised to core strategies – notwithstanding important similarities.

In his chapter on environmental activism, Oliver Pye delves into the distinct ways in which civil society engages with the environment in Southeast Asia: we find multiple 'environmentalisms' at play. Both domestic and international environmental NGOs are active in Southeast Asia, but their efforts are only part of the story. Rather, in a region in which issues of environmental justice are of necessarily critical importance, a range of other groups and actors, in social movements or otherwise, also push back against predations, press for better resource-governance, and more. Amid complex, ongoing processes of urbanisation and industrialisation, as well as democratic regression, Southeast Asia has become host to hotly contested strategies for both growth and ecological transformation.

Similarly pervasive and challenging region-wide, given these same economic-development patterns, are questions of migrant labour. Stefan Rother addresses migrant workers, as an especially diffused and structurally disempowered, yet increasingly horizontally and vertically mobilised, community in Southeast Asia. Home to both prominent countries of origin and of destination, this region has seen notable success in migrant workers' mobilisation and policy advocacy, particularly in the Philippines. Available political space and allies shape the scope for and character of advocacy that service-oriented community efforts support. Despite their achievements, Southeast Asian migrant workers and organisations still confront structural barriers, especially given their outsider status – and, hence disarticulation from many potential allies – and norms of sovereignty that impede progress on transnational labour protections.

Finally, David Camroux wrap ups the volume with a concluding chapter, drawing out common threads and insights.

Notes

- 1 Samuel Huntington (1993) especially elevated these ideas: he saw non-western 'Confucian' and 'Islamic' civilizations as having much in common, including prioritising the family and community over individual rights, consensus over dissent, and discipline over liberty. For a criticism of culturalism, see Rodan (1997), who argues that civil society emerges from wider historical processes, such as industrialization and its consequences for class/group relations, and not from particular cultural dispositions.
- 2 Other scholars in this tradition, however, disagree. For instance, Lilja et al. (2017: 45), approaching this question in the Cambodian context, from a Foucauldian concept of power and domination, argue that the feminist NGOs they study, which 'carry out' the struggle 'for' others on their behalf, play important roles in pushing the agenda on gender issues by being involved in 'proxy resistance' for other subalterns.
- 3 In both Vietnam and Laos, such organisational activities directly contradict the institutional organising principles of the party-state. The latter understands broad self-organisation of certain predefined 'functional interests' (women, workers, farmers, etc.) outside its own frames

- as the end of the political regime itself, and therefore a threat to ‘national security’ (Hansson, forthcoming).
- 4 Authoritarian-developmental political leaders often see independent trade unions as particularly threatening, given their disruptive capacity and their members’ expected strategic interest in widening political inclusion and rights. These leaders, especially in countries inclined towards export-oriented, extractivist, low-wage-based development models, including in Southeast Asia, have resorted to divide-and-rule strategies towards unions, combining cooptation, concession, and repression (see Hansson 2011; Pye and Caraway, both this volume).
 - 5 Its close connection with the developmentalist model renders environmental activism especially fraught. The state may serve as de facto accomplice to violent repression, as by not at least protecting citizens who engage in such advocacy, or the state may itself be the perpetrator, as by criminalising activists as ‘rebels’ or delegitimising them as ‘anti-development’. A case in point: after 48 deaths in 2017 and 30 in 2018, in 2019, the Philippines garnered the title of the ‘deadliest country’ in the world for environmental and land activists (Guardian, 30 July 2019). Indeed, environmental activists have suffered penalties ranging from imprisonment to murder across the region, at the hands of political or economic elites – even as various nature-oriented CSOs persist unchecked and may even offer a ‘safe’ venue for forms of political consciousness-raising (e.g. Tsing 2005; Pye, this volume).
 - 6 Xi Chen’s (2020) distinction between ‘civic’ and ‘noncivic’ activism, reflecting divergent state responses to popular protest and mobilisation in China, resonates also with several Southeast Asian contexts. The defining difference for Chen is whether activists advocate for the public interest, which nondemocratic states may see as especially threatening, or (among smaller clusters) for particularistic, private interests. That categorisation challenges previous research on contentious politics that centres material versus nonmaterial claims as most decisive for political elites’ strategies.
 - 7 In fact, Gramsci himself understood civil society to be, with political society, intrinsically part of the state (Buttigieg 1995, 4).
 - 8 For a typical recent example of anti-civil society propaganda: Nguyễn Xuân Mườì and Trần Xuân Dung (2019) issued a strongly worded warning against civil society and the hostile forces lurking behind it, which, they assert, aim to take on the communist party and destroy the Vietnamese regime.

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