

THE LIMITS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Social movements and political parties in Southeast Asia

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Beginning in the late 1980s, peaking in the 1990s and continuing into the 2000s, both scholars of Southeast Asia and reformers in the region enthused about the democratic potential of civil society (for example, Budiman 1990; Uhlin 1997; Clarke 1998; Alagappa 2004). They imagined civil society, commonly defined as the realm of associational life between family and state, as a site where ordinary Southeast Asian citizens were organizing autonomously, carving out democratic space, and challenging the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. Scholars and activists alike pointed to the enormous range of associations – human rights, environmental and women’s groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of various stripes, growing labour and farmers’ organizations, to name just a few – that were emerging across the region. These organizations were apparently flourishing in conditions as diverse as post-Marcos Philippines and Suharto’s Indonesia, and even sending out shoots in the infertile soil of Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore and the yet more desert-like conditions of military-ruled Burma (Kyaw 2004) or the one-party state of Vietnam (Kerkvliet *et al.* 2003).

Both the patterns of civil society organization that arose in the 1980s and 1990s in Southeast Asia, and the enthusiasm for such organization, were in large part a product of the nondemocratic regimes then dominating the region. Suppression of or limitations on opposition political parties led many middle-class reformers to look to alternative means of exercising political influence, often within radically decentred and loosely coordinated civil society sectors. Many of these reformers also sought to expand democratic space and promote political reform. In countries like Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, it was this combination of diversity and reform potential that made civil society resemble, in the eyes of its supporters and advocates, an engine of democratic change.

The prevalence of the civil society model as a strategy to oppose, or at least survive under, authoritarianism, was encouraged by wider regional and even global trends of political and ideological change. For example, emerging enthusiasm for the civil society model in part reflected the efforts of a post-Marxist left to seek new ways to advance agendas of popular empowerment and social justice while avoiding both the risks of repression and authoritarian tendencies they saw as coming with Leninism. Equally important was the rise of a new spirit of classical liberalism which understood the major division in society, not as one between antagonistic social classes, but as that between a society struggling for greater autonomy and an over-reaching state. This liberal vision in turn received both intellectual and financial succour from the advanced capitalist countries, with an array of both non-governmental and governmental

agencies from the 1980s increasingly willing to support NGOs and other civil society organizations throughout the developing world, including Southeast Asia. Much of this support was channelled toward the promotion of alternative development models – farmer cooperatives, micro-credit schemes, alternative technology and the like – but especially from the 1980s, there was increasing support for groups working on more politically sensitive issues, such as human rights or environmental protection, land disputes and even labour rights. A major shift occurred in the 1990s, as donor governments, such as that of the United States, began to develop democracy-promotion programmes that supported civil society groups in some countries. Even the major international development agencies such as the World Bank began to incorporate support for civil society into their programmes, packaging it as ‘participation in development’ and support for ‘good governance’.

As a result of these converging trends, for a brief moment reformers in Southeast Asia became enamoured of a new model of alternative politics that put civil society, popular empowerment and people’s participation front and centre. In fact, however, and viewed more than a decade on, what is perhaps most striking about the shape of civil society and the social movements that populate it across Southeast Asia is its variety. This variety, in turn, substantially reflects the variety of political regimes in the region. Regimes in Southeast Asia run the gamut from military authoritarian to approaching liberal democratic. All these polities share some degree of space, however controlled or curtailed, for social movements of various forms. How these movements and their component social movement organizations (SMOs) figure into the polity, though, differs greatly. Indeed, we may categorize the region’s regimes less by regime type *per se* than by the nature of their civil societies: those with a ‘legitimate civil society’, a ‘controlled and communalized civil society’ (which may be difficult to distinguish fully from the state) or a ‘repressed civil society’ (Alagappa 2004). Southeast Asian states with legitimate civil societies include post-1998 Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand – this category is the broadest one, although few of its members would be termed liberal democracies. States with controlled and communalized civil societies include Malaysia and Singapore. States in the region with repressed civil societies include Burma and Vietnam. Importantly, civil society may be legitimate without being terribly strong or internally unified.¹

That diversity *within* civil society is critically important, affecting not just component organizations’ core legitimacy, but their ability to bridge social sectors, percolate new ideas about society and politics, and either sustain or challenge the domination of state-supporting norms. SMOs are embedded within, and moulded by, prevailing structures of power, however much some of them deploy their clout to change those structures. In other words, civil society is as much an arena for the reproduction of social inequality as it is a site from which that inequality is challenged. Moreover, like other component parts of the polity, SMOs may logically span the ideological and tactical gamut: state-supporting to state-challenging, xenophobic to liberal, operationally murky to fully transparent.

Given these fundamental premises, one of the most consistent and noteworthy developments across the region is a new recognition of the limits of the civil society approach to political change, coupled with renewed attention to political parties as the other key set of vehicles for popular mobilization. Social movements and parties, analysts and activists increasingly find, complement each other, but are not interchangeable: political parties have a mandate and scope SMOs lack; SMOs enjoy flexibility and mutability that coherent parties cannot achieve. In particular, in countries in which there is a real space for democratic contestation through elections, we see a range of former civil society activists engaging or re-engaging with political parties as a means of directly contesting for governmental power. In the region’s more democratic polities, at least, increasing numbers of SMO activists, independently legitimate thanks to

their earlier engagement in civil society, but frustrated with the limitations on what they can achieve there, have entered formal politics. This pattern does not mean that the civil society model is no longer relevant. SMOs still not only function as important training grounds and recruitment pools for political parties and bureaucracies, but also offer information campaigns, policy lobbying, and more. Yet no longer in democratizing politics do they tend to assume the role of political opposition or see a need for real detachment from the state, as is more often the case under conditions of authoritarianism. In short, experience thus far suggests that civil society's much-touted democratizing influence is not only less certain, autonomous or decisive than its boosters suppose, but also tends to become even less so as democracy settles in. SMOs still can and do play a role in the more democratic states of Southeast Asia, but the position and potential of civil society should be understood differently in the context of different alternative channels for popular engagement and policy influence.

We trace these trends with reference to two core cases: Indonesia and Malaysia. These two states have experienced distinct sociopolitical patterns over time and represent a range of political possibilities. Indonesia has navigated among multiple regimes; early on its social movement organizations were tied closely to parties, but when parties were emasculated under authoritarian rule, they developed quite separately. In recent years, as Indonesia has democratized, some SMO activists have increasingly moved from civil society toward party-based engagement. Malaysia, in contrast, has a history of less radical disjunctures in regime type, and a long-standing stable of core opposition parties, participating consistently in a competitive electoral authoritarian polity. As in Indonesia, early SMOs helped to found Malaysia's early political parties, then faded to the background. Yet in Malaysia, too, coinciding with the invigoration of the civil society model across the region, SMOs regained prominence in the 1980s as a distinct force, largely unconnected to the world of political parties and elections. More recently, SMO-based activists and agendas have even significantly revitalized formal opposition politics, possibly at real cost to those SMOs. Guiding this comparison are questions on the links and disjunctures between formal and informal politics in Southeast Asia; we thus conclude by asking what the relationship between SMOs and more formal political structures are, and when and how these relationships change.

Civil society's colonial and postcolonial origins

The origins of contemporary Southeast Asian civil societies and the associations and social movements that populate them lie mostly in the early decades of the twentieth century, when an array of educational, self-help, sectoral and political associations came into being in the colonies and semi-colonies that constituted the region. Many such organizations aimed to advance the interests of a single community; many were defined by the politics of nationalism and anti-colonialism. The communist left and, more broadly, ideals of social egalitarianism and revolutionary mobilization of the lower classes, were also important influences across the region.

In the Netherlands East Indies, the first three decades of the twentieth century saw the establishment of Indonesia's first modern organizations, some of which continue to exercise influence to this day. Muhammadiyah (established 1912) and Nahdlatul Ulama (established 1926), for example, are still the country's largest Islamic organizations. Viewed schematically, these decades saw the birth of two distinct traditions of mass organization. On the one hand, some of the earliest organizations exhibited an elitist preoccupation with 'uplift', concentrating on an educational and service mission designed to bring 'natives' into the modern era and equip them with the knowledge and skills to benefit from it. Groups like Budi Utomo ('Noble Endeavour'), formed in 1908 and conventionally the first modern organization in Indonesian

history, focused on improving the lot of the Javanese *priyayi* class of colonial administrators, while Muhanmadiyah strove to promote the new 'modernist' Islamic principles then emanating from the Middle East, by which Muslims were encouraged simultaneously to return to the early ideals of their faith and engage with modern science and education.

A second tradition of organization emphasized popular unity, struggle and mobilization. This tendency was first embodied in Sarekat Islam (Islamic Union), a mass movement which blossomed in the second decade of the twentieth century, and rapidly took on anti-colonial, egalitarian and revolutionary impulses. When splits between communists and more conservative Muslims weakened Sarekat Islam in the early 1920s, and after an abortive communist revolt was repressed by the Dutch in 1926-7, the nationalist movement became the main locus of this new emphasis on anti-colonial unity, even as it struggled to survive in the face of repression from the colonial state.

Just as the Japanese occupation of 1942-5 ended Dutch colonial control, the ensuing revolutionary struggle for independence (1945-9) founded the new republic in a riotous profusion of popular organization. During the revolution, a proliferation of political parties, mass organizations and armed groups contended for power and strove to assert their sometimes very different visions of a new social and political order. Indonesia thus entered its period of postcolonial nation-building in the 1950s with a highly mobilized and organized society, where expectations of the material and other benefits that would ensue were very high. The deep politicization and organization of Indonesian society in the 1950s and 1960s took the form of '*aliran* politics', a term introduced by Clifford Geertz (1959, 1960). One feature of the *aliran* pattern was its communal foundation; another was the fusion of party and social movement organizations that underpinned it, with each major party (those of traditionalist Muslims, modernist Muslims, secular nationalists and communists) 'being surrounded by a set of voluntary social organizations formally or informally linked to it ... An *aliran* is more than a mere political party, certainly more than a mere ideology; it is a comprehensive pattern of social integration' (Geertz 1959: 37).

Thus, Indonesia was not only a highly organized society, with a dense fabric of associational life, it was also deeply divided. Despite internal divisions of wealth and power, the different *aliran* asserted fundamentally different visions of the future, with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and its microcosmos of affiliated mass organizations in particular threatening to upset the prevailing social order in a way that most other forces were determined to prevent. These contests came to a head in 1965-6 when the army and its civilian allies rallied against the left, wiping out the PKI, killing some 500,000 people in the process, and setting the scene for the military-dominated Suharto regime.

As in Indonesia, the roots of contemporary Malaysian civil society may be traced to the burgeoning of associational life in the early twentieth century. Then, faced with urbanization, intercommunal disparities and imminent independent sovereignty, a range of groups formed, oriented around communal progress, religion, minority rights and more, populating a new sort of public sphere (see Milner 1991). Even more so than in the Netherlands East Indies, these associations tended to follow the lines of ascriptive (racial or religious) identities. An array of clubs developed for sports, recreation, literature and similar issues, alongside more politically oriented organizations. In the latter category were groups that made representations to the British colonial government on policy matters, as well as ones that focused on cultivating race-consciousness and nationalism, especially among Malays, or on community development, self-determination, labour and group rights among the Chinese and to a lesser extent, Indian, communities. At the time, such organizations were really the only avenue for political participation, expression and community-building.² Given such factors as Malaysia's less tempestuous

quest for independence, the slow development of a pan-Malayan national identity and the deeply vertically stratified structure of colonial society, this early associational life was substantially less fractious and mass-based than in Indonesia in the same period – despite, for instance, similar experience of military training and mobilization under Japanese wartime occupation.

While political parties, many of them successors to SMOs, formed across society in the early post-war period, the most successful of them were elite-led and communal in orientation. Malays were the most prone to shift their efforts from civil society to parties, particularly the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (Parti Islam SeMalaysia or PAS). To a greater extent than for other communities, colonial rule had nurtured the Malay elite, not only through structures of partial indirect rule through peninsular sultans, but also through such institutions as the Malay Administrative Service. That integration with the colonial and developing postcolonial state fostered a deeper convergence between early SMOs and political parties among Malays. Among elites from other communities as well as the multiracial radical left, this shift toward political society was neither so pronounced nor so feasible. For instance, the British had left Chinese Malaysians (then about half the population) somewhat more autonomous and less well incorporated into the state bureaucracy, and vernacular education, the crux of much Chinese community organizing, remained largely outside the purview of the state. Largely as a result of this positioning, Chinese Malaysians remained heavily invested in civil society, even after the launch of largely communal political parties. And the adamantly anticommunist British banned the Malayan Communist Party, a policy the post-colonial regime sustained upon independence in 1957. The radical left found rough going in civil society as well; laws introduced in the late colonial and early postcolonial period (inspired by the cold war but enduring well beyond) required official registration for all sociopolitical organizations, allowed preventive detention of suspected troublemakers (particularly by way of the still-controversial Internal Security Act), and otherwise curbed civil liberties.

As the state developed and strengthened after independence, Malaysian social movements initially lost steam; civil society remained enervated through the 1970s. Still, a subset of religious, education-related and other SMOs sustained engagement, alongside 'public intellectuals', mass-based religious movements, trade unions and perennially out-of-office opposition political parties, which tended to align more with and function more like SMOs than parties.³ Both states, then, ended the transitional period after independence with a mix of SMOs and institutionalized political parties, although the crux of power had by then shifted definitively toward the postcolonial state in both.

Social movements and civil society under increasingly authoritarian states

Again, viewed rather schematically, and not without some irony, we may say that civil society as a sphere of political organization and opposition separate from political parties came into its own in both countries in large part as a by-product of the strengthening of their respective states. But it did so just as those states grew strong enough to suppress or preclude further development of the social movements therein. Of the two countries which are our focus, it is again Indonesia which presents the more dramatic case. Suharto's 'New Order' regime explicitly aimed if not to bring an end to the mass politicization of the early post-colonial period, then at least to domesticate that energy and harness it to the state. The regime's military leaders, and the civilian intellectuals around them, formulated a political vision which depicted the 'irrationality' of the masses and their enthrallment to 'primordial' sentiments as obstacles to economic development and social modernization (Liddle 1973). This vision became the intellectual foundation for the

regime's policies of depoliticization, by which it proscribed organizations that it saw as threatening its interests and corralled most others into a network of corporatist organizations that it controlled (Reeve 1985: 115–18). By the early 1970s, Indonesia had gone from being a country in which mass organizations proliferated and dominated the public political stage, to one in which the army and bureaucracy were the dominant forces and social movements were increasingly suppressed (even if public protest occasionally broke out in more or less violent eruptions).

The government banned the old mass organizations of the left, and tried especially hard to prevent autonomous organization among lower-class groups, implementing a 'floating mass' policy limiting political party operations in rural areas, and establishing a government-controlled trade union body as the 'sole representative' of workers. The major non-leftist political parties were not banned, but there was massive government intervention into their internal structures to ensure that compliant leaderships controlled them and in 1973 they were forced to fuse into two tame non-government parties. Many other organizations, ranging from youth groups to journalists' or peasants' associations, some of which had previously been affiliated to parties and some of which had been independent, suffered a similar fate: they were shepherded into peak bodies controlled by government appointees. The government was less ambitious when it came to controlling religious organizations, whose leaders had claims to scriptural authority that was necessarily beyond the government's ken, but state officials nevertheless closely monitored preachers and religious groups to ensure that they did not criticize the government or attempt to mobilize against it. In this climate, although a large number of (non-leftist) organizations survived, their leaders learned quickly how to accommodate to the regime's rules, speak its language, and avoid overtly challenging it. Some pockets of relative autonomy persisted, such as on university campuses which became redoubts of anti-government protest, but even here the government ultimately cracked down in the late 1970s, adopting a 'Normalisation of Campus Life' policy which greatly constrained student councils and the student press. By the early 1980s, on the surface at least, the New Order regime ruled over a political scene in which a varied civil society survived, but with its autonomous organizational capacity all but eviscerated.

Yet the New Order's attitude to social organization was not one of unrelenting hostility. On the contrary, its developmentalist vision in many respects drew on the elitist preoccupation with uplift and improvement that had been one important strand within Indonesian associational life from the early twentieth century. As a result, organizations such as Muhammadiyah, which ran a large network of schools, universities, hospitals and other social services, were able not only to survive but even to secure some government support for their activities. The preoccupation with development provided fertile ground for the rise, from the early 1970s, of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a new mode of civil society organization. Professional organizations of staff and volunteers, rather than mass associations of members and supporters, a defining feature of these groups in Indonesia was that most claimed to be oriented to development (Billah 1994), thus justifying themselves in terms of the regime's own meta-narrative. At the same time, NGOs also flourished because they forged connections with international sources of political influence and, crucially, funding. Most Indonesian NGOs received funds from overseas, either from the major US philanthropic bodies and agencies or from European church-based and development agencies, or, eventually, from the overseas development agencies of major western governments. By 1996, the government estimated that there were 8,000 such bodies in Indonesia, most of them working in areas like consumer protection, micro-credit, health care and alternative technology (Aspinall 2005: 87).

In conditions through the 1980s and 1990s in which other avenues of anti-government political expression – especially political parties – were constrained, the NGO sector became an important niche for critical and socially engaged middle-class activism. Several key institutions,

such as the Legal Aid Institute (LBH) and the environmental network Walhi, engaged in sometimes audacious anti-government activism, widely promoted ideas of human rights and social justice, and critiqued the regime and its ideas. By the early 1990s, LBH was proclaiming that it sought to become a 'motor of democratization' and NGO intellectuals and activists promoted a vision of 'civil society' as an arena of counter-hegemonic struggle against the dominance of the New Order state (Aspinall 2005: 86–115).

In fact, although NGOs played an important role in delegitimizing the New Order, their mobilizational potential was limited, not only by the regime's restrictions on independent organization, but also by their own status as professional organizations of middle-class staffers seeking career security and advancement. During the 1990s, a new generation of more militant anti-regime activists emerged on campuses and elsewhere, often deriding the NGOs for their conservatism (Eldridge 1995: 39–40), and the first stirrings of independent organization emerged in areas like the labour union sector (Hadiz 1997). When the final crisis of the regime came in 1998, following the external shock of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, it was groups with the ability to mobilize on the streets with a minimum of formal organization – notably students – who led the protest wave in favour of Reformasi that eventually undermined the cohesion and will of the regime and forced Suharto from office. NGOs and similar SMOs had played an important role in undermining the ideational foundations of authoritarian rule and promoting ideas of liberalism and democratic rule in the public sphere, but lacked the organizational weight to directly lead anti-regime mobilizations.

In Malaysia, the shift from open and competitive democratic rule to a more restrictive 'semi-authoritarian' system was neither so dramatic nor so bloody as in Indonesia. Dramatic changes took place in the early 1970s, as after nearly two years' suspension of parliamentary government (1969–71), a bigger, broader governing coalition (the National Front, BN) pared back space for speech, association and opposition broadly. However, the years of Mahathir Mohamad's premiership (1981–2003) were especially defining; he brought the executive front and centre in governance, pressed an adamant (and largely successful) developmental agenda that renewed and redirected regime legitimacy, and combined simple repression with more innovative efforts (for instance, state-led Islamization) to quash or outbid opponents. As Mahathir consolidated his position through the 1980s, new waves of SMOs – women's groups, Islamist groups, human rights groups, workers' groups, community development groups, and more – took shape or shored up their position to exploit perceived windows of opportunity, to press new issues onto the government's agenda, or in response to perceived threats to associational activity and civil liberties.

Particularly as developmentalism – including 'money politics' and an overarching pragmatism (extending to a drive to co-opt those forces potentially useful to the state) – settled in, social movements diverged more significantly from formal politics than previously. While civil society-based movements retained a degree of influence upon the political order, activists tended to remain outside the increasingly centralized developmental state. For instance, championship of Islamist values and policies among Muslim SMOs, starting largely with Muslim student organizations, pressed government and opposition parties to prioritize Islam as an increasingly central element of state policies and party platforms. Similarly, advocacy efforts by Chinese educationist organizations, particularly the United Chinese School Teachers' and School Committees' Association (Dong Jiao Zong), kept issues of Chinese education and minorities' cultural rights alive.

In this period, too, the tide of NGOs sweeping the region reached Malaysia. Kicking off this trend was the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), launched in 1967; together with a growing array of partner organizations, CAP brought issues not just of consumers' protection,

but also environmentalism and critical approaches to development, to public prominence. The civil liberties advocacy organization Aliran Kesedaran Negara (Aliran, National Consciousness Movement), established in 1977, is generally considered to have been the next modern NGO. Other advocacy-oriented organizations followed, for instance one important subset of organizations concerned with human rights and another focused on women's rights specifically, such as the All Women's Action Society (AWAM), Women's Aid Organization, and Sisters in Islam. Many of these groups became increasingly skilled at lobbying both government and opposition parties in addition to more diffuse consciousness-raising, public education and service delivery. Given Malaysia's soon comparatively high level of development as well as state restrictions on and barbs about foreign manipulation, financial support from overseas was less important to Malaysian NGOs than those elsewhere, although some SMOs did accept external funding. Also in dramatic contrast to Indonesia, where the party system was very weak, most of these organizations liaised more comfortably with opposition parties than with the increasingly dominant state, even if state subsidies, as for provision of domestic violence shelters or HIV/AIDS outreach services, supported a number of SMO-led initiatives. Moreover, NGO representatives served on government boards related to environmental, consumers', health, women's and other issues, and many of the highest profile social movement campaigns centred around lobbying for policy changes. Such efforts required close interaction with the ruling coalition. Indeed, the establishment during this period of a National Human Rights Commission and the enactment or fortification of legislation on issues such as domestic violence or consumers' protection may plausibly be traced to SMOs' agitation on these concerns.⁴

However much democracy-promoters lauded this new vibrancy in civil society, the space accorded social movements remained closely curtailed, nor did such activism signify real openness to more institutional engagement. Echoing a preference also clearly articulated in Singapore during the same period, the Malaysian government asked that activists organize in parties rather than in SMOs: the former could be effectively, legitimately defeated at the ballot box (especially given the imperfect fairness of Malaysian elections), while the latter were harder to deal with. In 1981, to encourage a more clear distinction between politically engaged and so-called 'friendly' NGOs, the government introduced amendments to the Societies Act that would require all 'political' societies – defined as ones that issued public statements – to register as such within a specified period and be subject to special constraints. A mass ad hoc campaign by SMOs won repeal of the amendments two years later. In an oblique nod to the political influence of advocacy-oriented SMOs, the regime famously labelled several of these groups, along with two opposition parties, 'thorns in the flesh' in a 1986 attack (Gurmit 1984, 1990; Means 1991: 194, 198–9).

The government attempted to keep such critical activities in check. Sporadic crackdowns, or at least the plausible threat of them, became the norm. Paramount among these attacks was 1987's Operasi Lalang, which saw the arrest of over 100 activists and politicians for alleged Marxist tendencies, many of them under the Internal Security Act (ISA). These arrests deterred some potential supporters from joining SMO campaigns, but also spurred new forms of protest and attendant organizations. For instance, human rights group Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Voice of the Malaysian People) formed out of a support group for ISA detainees and their families in the late 1980s.

Various factors fed SMOs' gains in numbers and prominence between the 1970s and 1990s. After 1970, government affirmative action policies encouraged the expansion of the middle classes and facilitated Malays' access to higher education; both a growing middle class and rising rates of education are generally positively correlated with civil societal activity. At the same time, rapid urbanization brought individuals from all ethnic and religious groups into close

proximity, sparking social dislocation, but also causing or aggravating problems such as pollution, traffic congestion and a lack of affordable housing and amenities. All these conditions might spur political engagement. At the time, however, institutionalized political space was shrinking. Under Mahathir, UMNO grew more dominant within the BN coalition, policy-making became an increasingly top-down process, and opposition parties could make limited headway, particularly at the federal level; where they did secure gains, particularly at the state level, they did so largely through appeals to Islam rather than, for instance, class-based platforms as earlier when the left was stronger.

Moreover, social movement activism yielded significant gains only in some issue areas. For instance, persistent, broad-based initiatives against laws such as the ISA, Printing Presses and Publications Act, and Universities and University Colleges Act have failed time and again, and environmental activists have only sometimes been able to press a conservationist agenda; SMO-coordinated campaigns to forestall construction of massive dams, to preserve areas from logging and deforestation, or to stall ill-advised hill projects or road and bridge development, for example, have been similarly unsuccessful. The strength of social movements in this period, then, was not only itself curbed by depoliticizing norms and laws and a relatively impervious state, but also may have said more about citizens' lack of faith in official avenues for political engagement than their expectation of real influence through civil society.

By the 1990s, and again in an obvious parallel to developments in Indonesia, experience of SMO activism was starting to solidify a sense of entitlement among citizens to participate in the policy process and in political affairs more broadly, even if without real expectation of success. Even critical government and media discourse about NGOs raised awareness of these organizations and what they do. The state's implicit or explicit sanctioning of certain groups, devolution of certain social welfare tasks to voluntary organizations, and apparent need to crack down at times to curb overly potent and widespread social activism belied Mahathir's insistence on the need for an authoritative, strong state. Matters came to a head when Mahathir ousted his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, from the government and party in 1998. Anwar used his case to rally thousands of Malaysians, frustrated with a lack of accountability, transparency and probity in government, to join a broadly inclusive social movement, dubbed Reformasi in tribute to the Indonesian movement of the same name earlier in the year, for thoroughgoing reforms of state institutions and policies. At this point, as apparent vulnerabilities in the incumbent regime shifted political opportunity structures, the scope and orientation of social movements entered a new phase. Centred on calls for political liberalization and the extension of a range of civil and political rights, the Reformasi movement united two poles traditionally segregated in Malaysia, one loosely leftist and the other Islamist. Coalition-building moved front and centre, both within civil society and between opposition political parties and SMOs. Moreover, activists from the latter started to grant far greater priority to electoral politics, whether directly by joining or launching campaigns, or indirectly by offering intellectual ballast and models.

An unprecedented proportion of Malaysian civil society engaged in Reformasi activism, either postponing or restyling issue-based advocacy and other specific interest agendas to foreground questions of democratization and systemic reform. The developing movement brought together groups organized around human rights, women's rights, indigenous people's rights, the environment, Islam, Christianity, labour and more, first in issue-oriented coalitions of opposition parties and NGOs, and then in a specifically electoral coalition dominated by political parties, the Barisan Alternatif (BA, Alternative Front). The BA aimed to organize the gamut of advocacy groups, mass Islamic organizations, labour unions, public intellectuals and students, as well as all the major opposition political parties in one encompassing coalition to oust Mahathir and reform the political order. At no point previously had the boundary between SMOs and

parties been so permeable; activists moved readily between the two, gauging strategically how best to pursue their objectives amid a complex process of political bargaining and protest. For instance, while a limited number of SMO activists had stood as opposition party candidates in the past, the 1999 elections saw a new approach: a coalition of women's SMOs ran their own candidate as part of the BA slate (Martinez 2003). Environmental and other single-issue candidates were considered, too. More broadly, the participation of SMOs in an electoral campaign lent experience in intercommunal coalition-building (given past campaigns over rights violations and other issues), helped with targeted civic education, offered expertise in election and parliamentary monitoring, and vouched for the credibility and plausibility of the opposition platform. However much such engagement might seem to represent institutionalization of a democracy-supporting function for SMOs, more contingent dimensions of personal charisma, organizational capacity and new opportunities for civic education and mobilization offer far greater explanatory leverage, in terms both of whose agendas prevailed then and of long-term implications for civil society.

Social movements and political parties: towards re-engagement?

These patterns of increasing social movement activism and narrowing space between civil society and political society continued to accelerate from the late 1990s on, although with variation between the two countries and over time. After 1998, when the authoritarian regime of President Suharto collapsed, Indonesia experienced a period of reinvigorated social movement activity, reminiscent – at least in terms of raw political energy – of earlier phases of Indonesian history. Especially in the first two or three years of political transition, a vast array of new movements and organizations came into being. The range of groups involved is so diverse as to defy easy summary, but ranged from ethnonationalist movements and indigenous people's groups in peripheral regions to new lobbying groups of employers and business in Jakarta, from new gay and lesbian alliances to transnational Islamist groups, from anti-corruption watchdog organizations in the provinces to ethnic militias trying to control protection rackets in Jakarta or other cities. At the same time, government – which in short order was transformed into a lively multi-party democracy – became more open to input and pressure from social movements and NGOs, especially when it came to legislative reform. Importantly, this period also saw signs of re-engagement by activists in social movements and civil society with political parties, as many of them tried to make the transition from lobbying and pressure group politics to direct engagement in the contest for government power.

One early sign of social movements' re-engagement with political parties came within weeks of the fall of Suharto, when some of the old large *aliran*-based religious organizations sought to re-establish their links with the worlds of party and parliamentary politics. In particular, Muhammadiyah leaders sponsored the formation of PAN (National Mandate Party) and Nahdlatul Ulama sponsored the formation of PKB (National Awakening Party), both of which became important second-tier parties. Yet the 1950s pattern of a 'pillared society', where associational life cohered around political parties engaged in zero-sum conflict, did not revive. The absence of a powerful revolutionary left and abandonment by most Islamic parties of their earlier Islamic state goals meant the party system now lacked the centrifugal dynamic of the earlier decade (Mietzner 2008). More fundamentally, with few exceptions, a lasting legacy of the New Order was that the nexus between political society and civil society was broken and most societal organizations of note were no longer formally or informally aligned with political parties, but free-floating.

Indeed, in some ways, the new pattern of associational activity resembled the image of a diverse and energetic civil society, hemming in and challenging the state on all sides, that had

been previously cherished by liberal reformers. Certainly, there was now a diverse range of groups that lobbied for reforms and tried to constrain state activity. This was evident, for example, in the labour sphere, where trade unions proliferated and had perhaps 10 million members five years after the 1997–8 crisis (Quinn 2003: 26, cited in Manning 2010: 157) and large street mobilizations by workers have succeeded in pressuring the government to withdraw revisions to labour legislation viewed as disadvantageous by unions (Manning 2010; see also Caraway 2004: 34–9, Ford 2009: Ch. 7). Above all, however, this pattern was evident in the newfound political influence of NGOs, advocacy organizations and think tanks, which used public pressure through the media or direct lobbying to effect legislative and even constitutional reform in a host of areas, such as the introduction of new anti-corruption laws and agencies, gender mainstreaming policies and laws on domestic violence, the establishment of crucial new democratic institutions such as direct presidential elections and a Constitutional Court, to name a few.

The resemblance between this pattern and the liberal model was itself no accident, but a result of activists' increasing integration in transnational networks, their growing reliance on financial support from developed country donors and, more broadly, growing globalization of politics. In the years following the fall of Suharto, international donors provided huge funding to Indonesian civil society, significantly affecting its shape. Donors like USAID pumped tens of millions of dollars into democracy programmes that, especially early on, largely aimed to build civil society capacity and advocacy. NGOs that flourished and built media profiles and public influence were those that were best able to adapt their discourse and priorities to those of the international agencies, even if this was a process that was fraught with tension and generated many resentments (Sinanu 2010). As the new democratic system settled into place, major donors increasingly shifted to supporting civil society activity that would improve government capacity, especially in policy formulation and service delivery, further contributing to a taming of the early unruly aspects of civil society (Aspinall 2010). Overall, the one place where the goal of a 'strong civil society' continued to be articulated most forcefully was, ironically, in the policy documents of donors.

Yet in certain crucial respects, this new decentred civil society proved to be very weak. Despite the tremendous energy and variety of groups pursuing reform and social justice agendas, NGOs and related groups were unable significantly to affect the basic composition of the ruling elite. The core institutions of state power continued to be dominated by elements of the oligarchic forces that had governed during the New Order (Robison and Hadiz 2004). Even as reforming NGOs saw elements of their political programme embodied in legislative and even constitutional change, they were largely unable to challenge the predatory dynamic that lay at the core of the polity, by which the oligarchy accessed and distributed state resources in the interests of primitive accumulation and power maintenance. Overall, a mood of impotent hostility to the new ruling elite and its corrupt practices emerged in activist circles, accompanied by frank acknowledgments by civil society activists of the limits of their own influence (Prasetyo *et al.* 2003). An 'anti-party' mood was another result, in which both the wider public and social activists in particular viewed political parties as fundamentally self-interested and corrupt (Johnson Tan 2002).

Another result of the impasse facing the liberal civil society model was an attempt by many individual social movement activists to become directly involved in government, and thus have influence on policy levers from within rather than simply trying to pressure from without. They did this by standing for election to legislatures as party representatives, a trend which became apparent in 2004 but was even stronger in the 2009 elections (McRae 2009). Rather than liberal or democratic reformers establishing a party of their own to contest elections (as had been

tried in a few cases in early post-Suharto elections, but achieved abysmally low results), these activists joined mainstream parties as individual candidates. Some individuals, like former student and People's Democratic Party (PRD) activist Budiman Sudjatmiko, achieved some success and a level of influence in established parties (in Sudjatmiko's case, in PDI-P, the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle), but more of them failed to be elected (as was the fate, for example, of noted labour activist, Dita Indah Sari). At the time of writing, there is little evidence that the entry of former activists into parliament and the parties is having a significant impact on the tenor of mainstream politics. Rather, it appears to be a means by which a layer of former activists in anti-government social movements are being absorbed into the ruling elite. Such a pattern seems to confirm that the still substantially oligarchic state continues to control access to real power and influence.

Malaysia differs from Indonesia in that there was no democratic breakthrough comparable to the 1998 collapse of the Suharto regime. Indeed, Malaysia's Reformasi challenge of that year proved to be abortive. Yet at the same time, engagement of SMO activists in parties has continued to accelerate. SMOs reprised the collaborative approach they had pioneered in 1998 especially for the 2008 general elections, when regime weakness – this time under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi – again made political opportunities seem favourable for institutional involvement. This time, the combined opposition made unprecedented gains, far surpassing their performance in 1999. Civil societal activists contributed substantially to that achievement by helping to craft unifying platforms; serving as candidates themselves (in far greater numbers, and with greater success and impact, than previously, although as in Indonesia, individual activists had stood for election under various parties also in 1999 and 2004); and ratcheting up both the excitement and the quality of the campaign through protest, media and other activities. In the process, they kept their own core issues, from corruption to sustainable development, on the table. Explained one longtime activist and previous women's movement candidate, the late Zaitun Kasim, at the time, 'We can't leave politics to politicians ... it is too important ... We campaign on issues that the mainstream political parties will not touch' (quoted in Kuppusamy 2008).

The fact that SMO activists see such potential in electoral politics implies a shift in the timbre of the regime: activists apparently perceive it to be more open than during Mahathir's more autocratic heyday. Moreover, their election not only brought new voices and issues to parliament, but suggested new trends in political participation and empowerment, including the politicization of younger voters via online channels (many linked with SMOs or sympathetic to social movement campaigns) and a growing climate of both critical and constructive discourse. That said, however feasible it is for social activists to enter the electoral fray, those elected tend to lack policy-making experience.

Indeed, however informed by activists' calculations of how best to achieve their ends, the drift from SMOs to political parties comes at a potential cost, both for civil society and for the political system overall. In Indonesia the flow from civil society organizations to political parties has been only a trickle, but in Malaysia activists' focus on elections has taken useful leaders from alternative roles in civil society, added an overt partisan slant to SMOs, and reduced the resources available for impartial post-election policy and performance monitoring. In Malaysia, checks and balances are already weak, especially after years of executive centralization under Mahathir. The sort of democracy these activists themselves tout demands mechanisms for accountability, which could be further enervated by so many key SMO activists joining electoral politics. Even so, critical SMOs do still retain a clear vision of the distinction between social movements and parties. The civil society-based People's Parliament initiative, for instance, established a Citizen Think Tank blog and Representative Watch Committees shortly after the

elections 'to help "our MPs" function the way they are supposed to' and to make sure 'the new kids on the block ... don't go the way of Barisan' (quoted in Shahanaaz 2008). Moreover, the migration of social movement activists to parties brings into relief the unevenness with which advocacy-oriented NGOs, mass Islamist organizations and other SMOs are distributed across society: most clearly, the bulk of 'NGO candidates' contested in urban areas (especially Selangor, the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur, and Penang), reflecting where their base was strongest.

Overall, however, electoral politics and the actual practice of governing remain distinct from social movement mobilization – the same sort of gulf that leaves many social movement activists feeling politically impotent and suspicious of political parties in Indonesia. Starting even in the comparatively repressive Mahathir years, SMOs have had discernible influence upon certain policy agendas and outputs and activists from civil society have recently come to reprise the organic connections with political parties that marked the late colonial and early postcolonial period. And yet SMOs still face different opportunities, challenges and incentive structures than political parties. For instance, the former are more likely to rely on donor funds than state machinery, and are often better able to focus on issues apart from the communal alignments on which electoral support still tends to rest. SMOs, in short, cannot substitute for political parties in Malaysia or Indonesia, nor can they enjoy the same sort of power, but they do represent an enduringly, and increasingly, important supplement to parties.

Conclusion

Empirical evidence from across 'third wave' states of SMOs' mobilization for democracy, both encouraged and rewarded by (sometimes naïve) donor support, has cultivated a general sense of civil society's liberalizing potential. A strong civil society, the argument goes, makes for a strong democracy. In the background of this view is frequently a Tocquevillean vision in which a strong civil society is one that is dense but decentred, consisting of an array of organizations that hem in the state on every side, each mobilizing distinct constituencies and lobbying in favour of diverse and particularistic interests, but coming together when necessary to achieve common goals. In the Southeast Asian context, questions of regime change and good governance have especially piqued scholarly attention to this vision of civil society and to social movements, particularly given the centrality of such movements in both successful and failed regime transitions, not only in Indonesia and Malaysia in 1998, but also for instance in the Philippines in 1986 and Burma in 1988.

Our analysis of Malaysia and Indonesia provides reasons for caution. On the one hand, Southeast Asia does provide evidence for the political salience of civil society and social movements. The recent histories of both countries illustrates that Southeast Asia is not a political arena where only oligarchs and capital have free rein, but is one where activists and organized masses can at times also have real political agency and impact. However, it would be naïve to reproduce uncritically the celebratory tone of much of the early civil society literature. Trends in the last decade or so in both Malaysia and Indonesia reveal that social movement activists themselves find civil society to be in some respects a limited arena of political struggle, and are thus pulled toward engagement in political parties, electoral competition and attempts to win state power, with varying degrees of success in both countries. Moreover, it is to a large degree the very features of the civil society arena that conform with the liberal vision – the particularism of most civil society organizations, their lobbying orientation and professionalism, the weaknesses of their linkages to political parties and to mass constituencies – which tend to limit their ability to bring about more thorough-going political change. Indeed, it is not too far a

stretch to say that it is the limits of the civil society model that have helped to produce limited democracies in Indonesia and Malaysia, and in other Southeast Asian countries. The simultaneous near-hegemony of neoliberal capitalism in the region since at least the 1980s, and the more recent trend toward securitization amid the global 'war on terror', likely magnify these tendencies by exalting the roles of stable states and markets above those of potentially disruptive social forces.

Moreover, in analytical terms, the focus on regime change has blinkered understandings of social movements: analyses have looked far more to NGOs and other SMOs' potential as drivers of democracy rather than to their own internal democracy, or to the modes in which they mediate between the rural/agrarian or urban/industrial grassroots, the middle classes and elite decision-makers. In this view, it makes sense to view civil society not merely as a political agent that may transform the state, but also as an arena where ideas about political and social order are popularized and where, in a Gramscian sense, bourgeois hegemony is achieved (Hedman 2007). In a similar vein, SMOs may be viewed not merely as counterweights to government but also as agents of governmentality, in the Foucauldian sense of the process by which individual subjects come to internalize dominant social and political norms, and to discipline and regulate their own behaviour (e.g. Bryant 2002; Li 2007). NGOs not only discipline the state, but also discipline citizens, especially subordinate groups, to accommodate themselves to emerging democratic political systems and liberal economic orders. And civil society itself is a domain of inequality: NGOs and other social movement organizations discipline client groups and are themselves disciplined by funding agencies and socio-political contexts. Such an understanding does not devalue social movements, but embeds them within the structures of power and hierarchy that infuse society, rather than merely positioning them as outside of, and counterposed to, the state.

Notes

- 1 On this variety, see for instance Rodan (1997).
- 2 On this early period, see especially Tham (1977); Firdaus (1985); Roff (1994); Heng (1996); Tan (1997).
- 3 Chua Beng Huat explains that faced with an immovable incumbent (in the case to which he refers, the Singapore's People's Action Party, although Malaysia's BN fits the pattern), 'opposition parties have in fact to campaign primarily on issues with identifiable constituencies, such as the poor, rather than with the generalized interests of seizing state power' (Chua 1995: 197).
- 4 Weiss and Saliha (2003) survey several of the most prominent of these movements.

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