The Prospects for Civil Society in Southeast Asia

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Executive Summary

With the fall of authoritarian regimes in various parts of Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe in the last decade, a new optimism about the prospects for liberal democracy around the world has surfaced. A significant element of this has been driven by the observation that rapid industrialization, particularly in East Asia, sets in train social transformations that necessitate political change. For many theorists, this necessarily means expanded civil societies in support of, and as a complement to, competitive party systems. If this view is correct, then moves in this direction in places like South Korea and Taiwan will be mirrored before long in the emerging industrial societies of Southeast Asia. Against such expectations, a number of political leaders in Southeast Asia and others have argued that Asian cultural traditions render such a scenario implausible.

In contrast with both of these positions, it is argued in this paper that economic development in Southeast Asia is producing social transformations that make political change extremely difficult to avoid. Indeed, adjustments in state-society relations are already occurring. But in many cases this has involved extended forms of state co-option as an alternative to the sanctioning of greater space for civil society. Furthermore, where civil society has been opened up, this has tended to be selective in favour of relatively privileged social forces from professional and business groups.

In any attempt to promote a liberal civil society in Southeast Asia, it must be understood that independent organizations vary in their nature and significance and not all warrant support. Some are hierarchically organized and advance elitist ideologies which are hostile to the idea of broad political participation. Others adopt democratic internal practices and strive for broad political engagement in the conduct of public affairs. Support for nongovernment organizations attempting to legitimate representation of the under-privileged is especially important to the fostering of a liberal civil society.
Introduction

In the last decade we have witnessed the end of the Cold War and the collapse of various authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, Latin America and East Asia. In the subsequent debates in policy and academic circles over the causes and direction of political change, the newly industrializing countries (NICs) of East Asia loom especially large. Rapid industrialization in these countries is thought to have set in train such social changes as expanded and more diverse middle classes which represent an irressipible force for political pluralism. In this view, greater social diversity accompanying industrialization translates into the flowering of civil society — organizations independent of government and state. It also means the imminent establishment of liberal democracy and its characteristic competition for power involving political parties and interest groups. The demise of authoritarian rule in East Asian societies such as South Korea and Taiwan is expected to be broadly mirrored in other parts of East and Southeast Asia as industrialization takes deeper root.

This forecast has not gone unchallenged. One increasingly popular challenge takes the form of a culturalist argument about an “Asian alternative” to “Western liberalism.” Put simply, the contention is that core Asian values, grounded in traditional culture, militate against the establishment of liberal democracy in the region. Therefore, there is certainly no inevitable flourishing of civil society in Asia as capitalist development advances. While this view is understandably popular among custodians of authoritarian rule in East and Southeast Asia, it also appeals to some influential policymakers and academics in established liberal democracies.

The challenge made in this discussion is quite different, however. While there certainly is no inevitable flourishing of civil society in Asia as industrialization proceeds, this is not a function of any cultural predisposition of Asian societies. Rather, historical factors have meant that the degree of independence from the state by both the middle classes and business experienced in early industrializing countries is unlikely to be replicated throughout East and Southeast Asia. To be more precise, there are means other than civil society through which the aspirations for political change might be accommodated — notably selective co-option of social forces. The structures of the state can be extended to involve some consultation of interest groups and permit a measure of political pluralism without opening up for the sort of competitive politics central to liberal democracy.

However, the capacity of authoritarian regimes to promote and institutionalize alternatives to civil society and liberal democracy in East and Southeast Asia is not uniform. The different combinations and complexions of social and political forces in the region mean different levels of amenability to co-option by the state. The acceleration of economic development in the region will only accentuate this. In some cases, pressures for civil society may be difficult to
contain. This prospect of diverse political directions in Asia runs very much counter to the Asian values prognosis and prescription. Authoritarian leaders who have espoused the rhetoric of Asian values are, in effect, attempting to dismiss some of this diversity as "unAsian" or "alien." It is an ideological exercise to limit political possibilities to nonliberal paths.

Yet if the emergence of civil society is a possible, though not an inevitable, byproduct of capitalist development in Southeast Asia, it must be underlined that civil society contains politically diverse elements. Contrary to the positive connotations commonly attached to civil society, groups that exist outside the state have divergent values and agendas, not all of which are marked by political tolerance or liberal democratic aspirations. Indeed, some forces within civil society hold to blatantly elitist and antidemocratic values. The implication of this is that attempts to foster the development of a liberal civil society need to focus energies on the promotion of particular organizations.

Some organizations currently seeking an expansion of civil society in East and Southeast Asia base their case around elitist notions such as meritocracy. According to this, the policy process should be opened up to those with technical expertise, but not to all those affected by policy decisions. The greatest potential of civil society to act as a force for liberal political change, however, derives from its potential to institutionalize the rights of organized citizens to influence the decision-making process. Independent organizations which have a potential mass membership and links with other elements of society, such as trade unions, for example, can play a critical role in fostering a liberal civil society.

The central argument made in this discussion, then, is that while political change is an inevitable consequence of the social changes which accompany industrialization in Southeast Asia, expansive civil societies and liberal democracies are but one possible direction change may take. This particular direction, however, does involve the most inclusive and representative political processes. Attempts to promote civil society that are intended to foster liberal democracy need to be discerning in the sort of independent organizations that are supported. In simplifying and demonstrating these arguments, let us start with some clarification of what civil society actually is and its implications for political possibilities.

The Concept of Civil Society

The concept of civil society has a long history, throughout which it has assumed a variety of meanings. This reflects in the diverse usages of the concept's current revival precipitated by political events in Latin America, Eastern Europe and East Asia over the last decade. As one analyst observes, "today, civil society has been found in the economy and the polity; in the area between the family and the state, or the individual and the state; in the non-state institutions which organise and educate citizens for political participation; as an expression of the whole civilising mission of modern society." The common theme to these
The understanding of civil society in residual terms vis-à-vis the state — the realm of social relations not encompassed by the state — often carries with it powerful normative assumptions about this separation. As Parekh points out, for liberal theorists, quite unlike civil society, the state is a coercive and compulsory institution: "coercive because it enjoys the power of life and death over its members, compulsory because its citizens are its members by birth and may not leave it, and outsiders may not enter it, without its approval." In this view, the role of government is to maximize the liberties of self-determining agents and to facilitate their goals, not to impose grand goals separate from these. The normative attachment to civil society is at times quite explicit in the literature. Kukathas and Lovell, for instance, assert that "the ideological and political collapse of communism suggests that we should redirect our attention to the target of its attack: to reassert the functions of the traditions and institutions of civil society, and to ask what is necessary if its development or regeneration is to be made possible." They also contend that "civil society is important because of its contributions to the constitution of human identity and the fulfillment of individual aspirations." Others emphasize the "civility" of this particular social realm, which is sometimes depicted as protecting liberal democracy from the inherent dangers of extremism.

The emphasis on civil society as the dichotomous opposite of the state, and the fashionable identification by scholars with the former, brings with it a number of problems: the idealization of civil society; the fostering of a zero-sum conception of the relationship between state and civil society; the obscuring of attempts to gain state power to shape relationships in civil society; and the conceptual concealment of ambiguous but significant relationships between state and society. Let us deal with these in turn.

First, civil society is in fact the locus of a range of inequalities based on class, gender, ethnicity, race, and sexual preference, for example, that are symptomatic of specific economic, social and political relationships of power. The "tendency to demonise the state and deify civil society," as Ketteler puts it, plays down this repressive side, and ignores the fact that the internal structures and practices of autonomous organizations can be both undemocratic and uncivil — a point amply demonstrated in some of the extremist organizations that surfaced in South Africa during the 1980s and Eastern Europe this decade. Obviously the political implications of the various elements of civil society differ according to their respective objectives and practices.

In East and Southeast Asia, economic change is giving rise to a variety of challenges, some of which are by new sources of power and wealth seeking more open and accountable public decision making. Even here, though, the aspirations for political liberalization can be somewhat exclusive. It is worth remembering that the vision of "democracy" among many of the students involved in the 1989 demonstrations in China, for example, excluded any significant political participation or representation for workers and peasants. Other challenges in East and Southeast Asia come from marginalized groups resistant to certain forms of change, such as the recently banned Muslim fundamentalist non-government organization (NGO) Al Azqam in Malaysia, a group motivated by concern about the erosion of traditional religious values. In short, a range of elitist and hierarchical structures and ideologies characterize many of the various organizations surfacing in the region.

Second, the notion that state and civil society are essentially locked in some sort of zero-sum game is especially limiting. Stepan's specification of four logical possibilities in the unfolding of power relations between state and civil society is worth reiterating: state power can be extended in zero-sum fashion to the detriment of civil society; power in both realms can be simultaneously expanded in a positive-sum game; power can simultaneously decline in both realms, in a negative-sum fashion; and, finally, the power of civil society sectors can expand while those of the state decline. This set of political possibilities runs counter to the popular view which associates the advance of capitalist industrialization with an inevitable extension of civil society. Yet it is more consistent with the diversity of political accommodations taking place in East and Southeast Asia to the social transformations accompanying industrialization. In Singapore, for instance, the last decade has witnessed the expansion of the reach of the state itself, not civil society, in response to these pressures. A host of new mechanisms have been developed to co-opt ethnic, business and social groups.

Third, the connection between civil society and the state is stronger than the latter providing the legal framework for the former to exist. Political contestation — whether it be over the control of formal political institutions of the state or the attempt to influence these through interest groups or social movements — often centers around competing efforts to redress or consolidate relationships in civil society via the state. This might involve direct political action, or it may be directed through organized political parties. The relationship between the state and civil society has received some attention from Held,10 and Keane,11 who have argued the case for the mutual "democratization" of state and civil society. Essentially, their point is that the independence of civil society is of limited value to reformers in pursuit of egalitarianism without simultaneously breaking down elitist and representative structures embodied in the state. These structures resonate with, and shore up, the interests of certain sections of civil society hostile to reform. Another problem with the conception of civil society as the dichotomous opposite of the state, then, is that it downplays the cooperative and complementary relationships between elements of both.

Fourth, there is a real danger that too sharp a delineation of state and society — and the related delineation of state and civil society — conceals the way in which societal forces have been incorporated or co-opted into some sort of relationship with state structures. The boundaries between state and civil society
are everywhere greatly complicated by the existence of a host of institutional fora that attempt to incorporate social forces — not just in East and Southeast Asia. The way in which these institutions incorporate social forces, however, can vary from forms of democratic representation to the imposition of state preferences favoring certain social groups. These differences warrant careful analysis within East and Southeast Asia because they have crucial implications for civil society and democratic possibilities. Co-option can also introduce important dynamics to the political process within the state, including forms of unanticipated contestation that can affect the content of public policy.

Where do these points lead us? Clearly there are various forms of political space, some more restrictive than others. The concept of civil society must be preserved for specifying a particular form of political space — the least restrictive. But the concept cannot include all, independent, voluntary social organizations, as some theorists maintain. Instead, a distinction must be drawn between civic and civil society, the latter involving regular attempts to advance the interests of members through overt political action. As Bernhard emphasizes, civil society requires legal protection of "the existence of an independent public space from the exercise of state power, and then the ability of organizations within it to influence the exercise of state power." Seen in this way, civil society is an inherently political sphere, of no less significance than formal political institutions such as parties. Such a definition allows us to make qualitative distinctions between different sorts of NGOs. This point will be developed further below when we also see that among those organizations that do qualify as part of civil society, some are strategic for the consolidation and extension of this particular form of political space.

To summarize thus far, the dominant understanding of civil society is imbued with a strong normative preference for a limited state. This tends to obscure the great diversity of social and political elements in civil society in favor of a general championing of civil society per se. Equally, it encourages loose, inclusive conceptions of civil society that make insufficient distinction between the different nonstate components of society — civic and civil society. An argument has thus been submitted for a sober recognition of civil society's complex and diverse make-up, including antidemocratic elements, and the adoption of a definition of civil society that stresses its political nature.

Let us now turn our attention to how this concept might assist an understanding of contemporary social and political developments in East and Southeast Asia. At one extreme of the related debates we have an expectation of an eminent and liberal civil society as capitalist development gathers momentum. At the other extreme we have, in effect, the proposition that civil society — or at least a liberal civil society — is culturally alien to Asia and must be avoided, otherwise social discipline and economic development will give way to chaos.

Pressures for Political Pluralism and the Revival of "Asian Values"

Dramatic economic development in much of East and Southeast Asia since the 1960s has set in train social transformations involving new centres of economic and political power, as well as new divisions and conflicts. This has resulted in pressures on authoritarian rule, not just from emerging business and middle classes seeking the greater institutionalization of the rule of law, transparency in government and the curtailment of corruption, but also from organizations representing labour, women, environmentalists, and social justice and human rights activists. Broadly speaking, there has been an upsurge of political opposition, but significantly without the sort of strategic influence of communists, socialists and radicals that has characterized previous historical phases of opposition. Certainly liberal democratic ideas feature prominently within the political philosophies and aspirations of many of these social forces, although they are one element of a wider complex. What is crucially important is that these social forces have agitated for the right to influence public policy. That has generally required a reassessment of state-society relations by authoritarian leaders.

The complexity and strength of these pressures have obviously varied throughout East and Southeast Asia, as have the responses by authoritarian regimes facing such challenges. Thus, throughout the region we have witnessed a differential mix, importance and character to political parties, social movements, NGOs, and organizations co-opted into some sort of political relationship with the state. We can expect the contrasting mixes in the forms and substances of these political oppositions in each society to produce even more divergent trajectories as capitalist industrialization consolidates and reflects local conditions.

A major divide is likely, however, between societies in which changes in state-society relations permit significantly greater independent political space — where civil societies expand — and those where more extensive and ingenious forms of political co-option are devised. Clearly developments in Taiwan, South Korea and to a lesser extent Hong Kong have been much more facilitative of independent political spaces than Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, for example. In the former, interest groups representing labour, business and professionals, together with an assortment of social movements and NGOs are playing an increasingly active political role — in some respects surpassing political parties. By contrast, in the latter, what concessions have been made to political pluralism have often involved extensions to state structures themselves. This has taken quite elaborate form in Singapore to selectively sanction wider consultation with elements of both business and middle classes.

Here the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is attempting to shore up elitism at the same time as it widens the incorporation of social forces into state structures.
But in Indonesia, labour strikes, public demonstrations over press bans, and the Jakarta riots of 27 July 1996 serve as a reminder that, outside the city-state, the viability of corporatism is likely to be more fully tested.

Since the 1980s, the fortunes of authoritarian regimes have certainly suffered in the region, starting with the collapse of the Marcos regime in the Philippines and followed by the fall of military and civilian dictatorships in South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand. Events in 1989, culminating in the Tiananmen Square massacre, also underlined the more than residual opposition to authoritarian rule in China. Then, following twenty-eight years of military dictatorship, in 1990 the National League for Democracy (NLD) had a landslide electoral victory in Burma. Despite tight controls on campaigning and the house arrest ten months earlier of its leaders, the NLD picked up 392 out of 485 seats while the pro-military National Unity Party won just 10 seats. The military prevented the elected leaders from taking office, but this was another powerful rebuff for the idea that Asians have some cultural predisposition towards “strong government.” Meanwhile, and in defiance of Chinese authorities preparing to regain sovereignty in mid-1997, elections in 1991 and 1995 in Hong Kong also appear to have whetted an appetite for greater political representation.

In these circumstances, it is understandable that authoritarian leaderships remaining in the region might feel a little nervous about the patterns of change around them and anxious to dissuade their own populations from emulating any of these experiences. This is the context in which proclamations about “Asian values” has surfaced. In essence, “Asian values” portray challenges to authoritarian rule emanating from civil society as culturally alien to Asia. Ironically, it is not that long ago that theorists were documenting what they saw as the impediments to modernization presented by traditional cultures, including “Asian values.” It is even more ironic that for some of these writers the very diversity of Asia in social, political and cultural terms was part of the problem. Ho, for example, argued that:

It is therefore more appropriate to use the term “Asian Values” to denote not a particular set of attitudes, beliefs and institutions which all Asian people share in common, but rather to refer to the great diversities which characterize Asian values as such, and which in the context of this discussion, pose serious difficulties to the task of modernizing Asia for social, economic and political development. 13

It was precisely this diversity which led John Steadman as early as 1969 to argue in The Myth of Asia that “the most obvious signs of unity in Asia are, paradoxically, those of Western influence.” 14

The contemporary focus on “Asian values,” however, not only attempts to distil essential cultural elements across the region, but puts a decidedly more favourable gloss on them. Thus we are told that such “Asian” cultural characteristic as group rather than individual orientation, the importance of family, the propensity to adopt consensual rather than competitive decision-making processes, and emphasis on education and saving have underscored political stability and economic development. 15 While the particular combination of characteristics may vary from one account to another, the common theme to these portrayals is the notion that social and political organization is hierarchical or controlled from above. Furthermore, this is presented as a natural state of affairs, since it is rooted in Asian culture. This top-down model of social and political organization inferst at best a limited place for a civil society housing social groups or individuals that make demands on the political and social elite. Instead, obligations to the state are stressed, thereby obviating the need for societal demands to be conveyed via independent organizations.

Adherents to the “Asian values” thesis, both inside and outside East and Southeast Asia, have tended to characterize Confucianism as the cultural underlay to these particular values, raising questions about where the nonethnic Chinese communities fit in this schema. No less significantly, the essentials of “Asian values” have been defined principally in opposition to what is commonly referred to as “Western liberalism” which is seen, among other things, to be characterized by excessive individualism and a propensity for protestation and open political conflict. The consistent reference to “Western liberalism” conveys the clear message that liberalism is an “alien” set of social and political values for which “real” Asians have a cultural aversion.

The concerted attack on liberalism reflects the fact that political forces in East and Southeast Asia have generally moderated, compared with previous attempts to carve out greater space for civil society. In the past, the spectre of communism or arguments about the primacy of initiating economic development have been drawn on to justify authoritarian rule and curtail political pluralism in much of the region. However, the social forces associated with the current push for political space, particularly from the middle and business classes, largely involve groups and individuals with a strong stake in the consolidation and deepening of capitalism. These challenges to authoritarian rule cannot be so easily dismissed, hence the new critical focus on liberalism and its juxtaposition with “Asian values.” In this exercise, attempts to carve out civil society space are depicted as a mimic of foreign ideas, incompatible with the cultural basis of Asian politics and societies.

In emphasizing the utility of “Asian values” to the maintenance of authoritarian rule, it cannot be denied that there are other factors behind this turnaround in the meaning and application of “Asian values.” These factors include rapid economic development and a favourable repositioning of Asia within the global political economy. It is understandable that many people within these predominantly postcolonial societies should derive pride from this, not least political leaders. We should not be surprised either that greater institutionalization of economic and political relationships in the region is unfold-
The absence of substantive definition to “Asian values” is not without its advantages for champions of this position. Indeed, from a political and ideological point of view it is paramount that the notion be retained at as abstract and vague a level as possible, thereby maintaining the possibility of wide appeal and simultaneously rendering detailed scrutiny difficult. Nevertheless, this does produce some interesting ambiguities and contradictions. Take for instance the importance Lee Kuan Yew claims to attach to an independent judiciary. While fundamental to liberal democracy, this notion has not been linked to “Asian values.” Indeed, in 1995 the Mayor of Seoul, Dr. Cho Soon, argued that the traditional absence of this and related concepts in Asia necessarily meant that the development of democracy in the region could not replicate Western experience. Yet, as international newspaper proprietors have discovered to their considerable cost, nothing is more likely to provoke the authorities in Singapore than to cast doubts on the independence of the judiciary from the executive. For those who feel no compunction to uphold liberalism and are confident about a defensible political alternative, there are surely a host of plausible political arguments for not placing central importance on the separation of powers.

This uncertainty about what actually constitutes the “Asian alternative” underlines that the principal dynamic behind the revival of “Asian values” by authoritarian leaders is to negate the perceived appeal of liberalism within Asia. Not surprisingly, then, these leaders find themselves not just at odds with other Asians who reject the attempt to depict their views as “alien,” but also with those who take seriously the question of how cultural heritages in Asia shape contemporary possibilities. In a 1995 lecture in Singapore by Professor Tu Wei-ming of Harvard University, one of those experts who had earlier been consulted by Singapore’s authorities on Confucianism, he raised very serious doubts even about the validity of Confucianism as the basis of a critique of “the West.” To be relevant today, Tu argues, Confucian tradition needs to be creatively transformed by some of the values of the European Enlightenment, including human rights, freedom, liberty and due process of law. If this can be achieved, without sacrificing such spiritual resources as family cohesion and respect for elders, then Tu believes Confucianists would then, and only then, have earned “the right and responsibility to be critical of excessive individualism, litigiousness and social disintegration.”

A more direct refutation of the attempt to harness Confucianism and Asian cultural traditions to an attack on liberalism has been undertaken by other Asian political figures themselves. Indeed, former presidential candidate and leading dissident and human rights campaigner in South Korea, Kim Dae Jung, has turned the argument on its head. In an explicit response to Lee Kuan Yew’s published views in the American journal Foreign Affairs, Kim argues that democracy has deep roots in Asian cultures and philosophies, including the works of Confucius, Lao-tzu and Mencius. In China and Korea, a country prefecture system had been in place for 2000 years when Western societies were
still being ruled by feudal lords. Far from Asia’s cultural traditions obstructing liberal democracy, Kim maintains they contain the intellectual and ideological bases for a major contribution to a new “global democracy.”

Kim’s high profile, like that of President Ramos of the Philippines, who has also clashed with Lee Kuan Yew over the latter’s antidemocratic prescriptions for the region, and Hong Kong human rights campaigner and Legislative Councilor Christine Loh, gives these intra-Asian disputations a certain visibility. However, there also exists a range of other oppositions within Asia to the “Asian values” thesis. Take, for example, the issue of human rights. The position adopted by Asian governments in the Bangkok Declaration in March 1993, prior to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, emphasized the importance of historical, cultural and regional specificities in the interpretation of human rights. This amounted to a serious qualification to the idea of human rights as universal, and included arguments about the importance of social stability and economic development rather than abstract individual freedoms as the primary basis of gauging human rights. The message was clear: the West should not try to impose its culturally specific standards on other countries.

Regional NGOs responded immediately to reassert the universality of human rights across cultures. In July of the following year, and despite the efforts of Thai authorities to jettison the gathering, the Southeast Asian NGOs’ Forum on Human Rights and Development in Bangkok issued a further statement which extended the challenge to regional governments on human rights. The statement included condemnation of the repressive State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in Burma and the occupation of East Timor by Indonesian authorities. Moreover, while these NGOs accepted the importance of linking human rights with social and economic rights, as the ASEAN governments had earlier insisted, they drew on this principle to call for more equitable distribution of income, environmentally sustainable development, and the removal of gender discrimination. Clearly, within the region there are individuals and groups who see a case for critically evaluating the liberal concept of human rights, but this is linked to social and economic reform agendas few authoritarian regimes would welcome. Indeed, as Ghai has argued, the sensitivity of authorities in Asia to debate over human rights is grounded in concern about the potential of this to question the structures of power and authority embedded in material disparities, corruption, the influence of international capital and other objects of popular animosity.

The attempt by authoritarian leaders in Asia, then, to dismiss dissenting views on human rights on the basis that they simply echo mainstream “Western liberal” opinion does not hold up to scrutiny. Liberalism is a significant political force in the region and, as the formation in 1994 of both the Forum of Democratic Leaders in the Asia Pacific (FDL-AP) and the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD) illustrates, it has the potential to assume more formal networks across East and Southeast Asia. However, other challenges to authoritarian rule exist, inspired by notions of democracy and development that go beyond liberal individualism. Various NGOs involved in social and economic development throughout much of Asia involve efforts to promote participatory democracy. In the endeavour to sustain local communities, economic and political decentralization is a priority for many in Asia. As Callahan points out, there are grassroots alternatives to the notions of “Asian democracy” propagated by elites which draw on local knowledge and traditions in Asia.

Illustrating this point, Aung San Suu Kyi — one of Asia’s most popular political figures — insists that democracy takes a variety of forms and should not simply be equated with one dominant form. Indeed, even in the West the forms vary significantly, and we should expect the same in Asia. However, this cannot be used to justify authoritarian rule. Rather, she contends that “People’s participation in social and political transformation is the central issue of our time.” Moreover, Aung’s critique of what Lee Kuan Yew and other proponents of “Asian values” would regard as “Western decadence” is seen in very different terms:

Many of the worst ills of American society, increasingly to be found in other developed countries, can be traced not to the democratic legacy but to the demands of modern materialism. Gross individualism and cut-throat morality arise when political and intellectual freedoms are curbed on the one hand while on the other fierce economic competitiveness is encouraged by making material success the measure of prestige and progress.

Such a critique has obvious relevance for much of Asia where economic individualism generally faces less constraints than in established liberal democracies in which environmental groups and others exert a greater influence to protect wider community interests. The philosophical contrast between Aung and Lee is a dramatic but nevertheless poignant reminder of the diversity that the “Asian values” generalizations obscure. Such authentic expressions of Asian opinion as Aung’s obviously pose a special problem for the credibility of “Asian values.”

The point of the above is not to establish the “real” Asian values but to instead emphasize that there are a number of different political voices in Asia. The views championed by advocates of “Asian values” are not an “Asian alternative” to “Western liberalism” but an alternative in Asia to liberalism. As will be explained below, the same attacks on liberalism can be found in the West itself.

**Support in the West for “Asian Values”**

Of no less importance in this “Asian values” rhetoric is the depiction of liberalism as absolutely and equally ascendant throughout “the West.” Yet behind this convenient monolith, there are considerable differences in the constellation and strength of political forces and ideas from America to Europe,
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for example, which pose varying domestic challenges to liberalism and incite serious debates over the nature of liberalism itself among its supporters. At their core, these challenges and debates centre around the fundamental and unresolved disputes over the relative rights and responsibilities of individuals and the state: precisely the same set of questions underlying political and ideological contestation in Asia today and embodied in the content of “Asian values.” It is the linking up of ideological forces across East and West in the prosecution of positions taken in these fundamental disputes, not a clash of cultures, which is unfolding. Critical in this is an amalgam of conservative and neoliberal forces seeking, in the West, to reverse a range of social and political reforms of the postwar period that resulted from certain social democratic and liberal pressures.

The integration of Asia into domestic ideological and political battles in the established liberal democracies has gathered momentum as the economic fortunes of the former increasingly contrast with those of the latter. Some observers, like American economist Paul Krugman, have argued that this will prove a short-lived growth spurt owing to structural limitations to these Asian economies. Whether this argument holds or not, it appeals to those who view political liberty as a functional requirement of sophisticated capitalist development. But a host of policymakers and academics have come to the conclusion that the competitiveness of the “Asia model” simply compels some pragmatic adjustments in “the West.” On this matter, neoliberals (or free market advocates) and conservatives have ready-made solutions which resonate with various “Asian values.” These include curbs on the power of independent trade unions and the reassertion of hierarchical institutions that emphasize obligations to the state and nation ahead of rights to be claimed on the state.

The concept of “Asian values” also provides a tempting rationale for governments and their bureaucrats, anxious to extend economic relations with Asia, moderating public positions on human rights in an attempt to avoid diplomatic friction. Academics with specialist knowledge about Asian cultures can also feel empowered by the opportunity to “unlock the mysteries of the East” that this debate presents. And there are assorted radicals whose animosity towards imperialism also leads them to sympathize with attacks on “the West.”

So there are a variety of seductions in “Asian values” outside the region.

This harnessing of the “Asian values” debate to domestic politics has been quite explicit in Australia where, for the last decade, economic restructuring has been closely tied to the idea of greater economic relations with Asia. A variety of politicians, journalists, business leaders, academics, judges and other prominent figures have weighed in with recommendations on how Australian society needs to be reformed in response to, or emulation of, Asian development. Increasingly, the same process is reflected in the United States, Britain and Europe. In 1995, the chairman of the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, the Conservative Party’s David Howell, gave one of the most direct and comprehensive such statements in alerting Europeans to imminent “Easternization.” According to Howell, this is “not just about adopting the business techniques of those now in the ascendent, the Asian dynamic, but about some of the values and attitudes which lie beneath their success both as economies and societies.” Not surprisingly, this leads among other things to the endorsement of “the greater security which flows from families and neighbourhoods” ahead of the welfare state.

The point is that much of the force behind the “Asian values” debate stems precisely from the fact that these values have international, transcultural meaning and appeal. Without a recognition that these values resonate with ideologies and interests outside the region, it would be difficult to understand why such thoroughly “Westernized” proponents of these values as Lee Kuan Yew would not have their credentials to speak on behalf of “Asia” more seriously scrutinized if not dismissed. So notions of “Asian values” are not only being deployed in an attempt to marginalize, if not obstruct, emerging political oppositions within much of Asia. They are also incorporated into established liberal democracies in the ongoing battle for ideological ascendancy between competing liberal, conservative and social democratic forces. It is this combined political significance of “Asian values” that makes it so influential and important a debate, and that also exposes as myth the proposition that such values are culturally distinct.

Changing State-Society Relations in Southeast Asia

The points have been made that there is no enduring cultural aversion to civil society in Asia and that political opposition and civil society have enjoyed relative prosperity at previous points in the histories of East and Southeast Asia. It does not necessarily follow, however, that civil society will inevitably flourish as capitalist revolutions consolidate in the region. But the complex social transformations involved will necessitate political changes to state-society relations. The increasingly numerous and differentiated middle class, which encompasses a range of professionals, public and private bureaucrats and the self-employed, is a major dimension of this. So too is the development of business classes who embark on more sophisticated domestic and global capital accumulations strategies. The expansion of wage labour is a further aspect of these social transformations beginning to assert itself in some cases. Such new interests and identities are manifesting in pressures for influence over the policy process, as well as precipitating new tensions involving social groups and classes adversely affected by change.

An expanded civil society is one possible scenario to accommodate this, though clearly not the one preferred by authoritarian leaders in Southeast Asia who look askance at recent directions in South Korea, Taiwan or even Hong Kong. To differing extents, alongside the growth in political parties in these three East Asian societies, independent trade unions, interest groups and/or nongovernment organizations (NGOs) are exerting a significant influence over the political process. If civil society is to be resisted in Southeast Asia, other
forms of social and political organization which do not involve the same measure of independence from the state must be effectively institutionalized. But while governments in most of Southeast Asia may share a preference for resisting the expansion and diversification of civil society, the capacities to do this are not uniform. The brief and selective examination of this question below not only makes this point, but underlines that where any significant concessions are being made to greater independent political space this has essentially involved comparatively privileged elements of society.

At one extreme of the spectrum in Southeast Asia we have Singapore. Here, new mechanisms have been developed to widen the structures of co-option, but on a very selective basis. A variety of institutional arrangements facilitate consultation with professionals, business groups and ethnic organizations in the public policy process, including the appointment of nominated members of parliament (NMPs), wider use of parliamentary committees and government-sponsored think tanks. Significantly, though, this consultation is depicted by authorities as a functional process which draws on expertise. It is sharply contrasted with the sanctioning of interest-based politics. Probably the only significant exceptions to this pattern of the state extending its umbrella to reign in more of society involve the Nature Society of Singapore and the Association of Women for Action and Research. These small NGOs, both of which are dominated by cautious middle-class activists with politically moderate objectives, have been able to enter the political process in a limited way.

Meanwhile, avenues for organized, independent political contestation by, and on behalf of, the underprivileged in Singapore remain extremely limited, not the least through fear of enforcement of the Societies Act which bars engagement in "politics" by organizations not registered for such a purpose. Attempts by lay religious organizations in the late 1980s to represent the interests and concerns of guest workers was enough to precipitate an extensive internal security crackdown. The government-controlled National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) remains the fundamental voice of labour. Consequently, growing concerns over the last decade about widening material inequalities may have translated into greater electoral support for the PAP's formal political opponents, but these parties cannot draw on, nor connect with, independent social organizations with complementary reform agendas. This is the fundamental limitation of electoral politics: its severing from a civil society.

Beyond the small city-state, the constraints on independent political activity are not quite as effective or complete, although co-option of emerging social forces is also a dominant theme. In particular, since the mid-1980s we have witnessed in Southeast Asia the rapid expansion of business and professional organizations. In Indonesia and Thailand, at least, some of these groups have achieved considerable power. MacIntyre has demonstrated how industry organizations and business groups have been able to use the Indonesian state's corporatist structures, which blur the distinction between state and society, to derive benefits for their members. This, he argues, effectively amounts to expanded political representation. Tek has also maintained that, in the Thailand case, business associations have become autonomous of the state, acting as interest groups, even if there are "close and supportive relations between the government and organized business."

The point such developments underline is that, whether it takes the form of opening up civil society or extending the state's structures of co-option, any increased political representation that has taken place has been occurring on a selective basis. It has generally excluded the underprivileged. However, the extension of the market economy within Southeast Asia and its unequal social and economic effects are likely to generate increasing pressure for the protection and advancement of disadvantaged social groups. Yet, as a legacy of decades of authoritarian rule, the institutionalized incorporation of organized labour into the structures of the state is well advanced throughout Southeast Asia. The underprivileged — who are not always wage labourers but can also include peasants, merchants and various categories of self-employed — therefore have to look for other groups to represent their interests. Thus, either in conjunction with, or in place of, trade unions, NGOs engaged in social and economic development and, to a lesser extent, social movements have emerged as significant political influences in the region.

The roles of development NGOs in Southeast Asia vary, from high-profile activism in the Philippines and Thailand to a more moderate role in Indonesia and Malaysia, limited in Singapore, and virtually nonexistent in Burma and Laos. Some so-called NGOs engaged in social and economic development in the region have either been co-opted by government or are self-promoting or self-interested. However, in view of the tight clamp on overt political activities and the very nature of work undertaken by many of these organizations, they have come to assume an important unofficial political function. The personnel of such organizations are mostly drawn from urban intellectuals and middle-class groups. But these people nevertheless act as advocates for the underprivileged, working for the poor, and taking risks, knowing the political and economic costs involved. A new NGO ideology has evolved out of their work. Many have learned that development practice cannot be neutral and that empowerment of the poor, disorganized and disenfranchised is the key to "real" development. In addition, poverty has been defined as a political issue, since poverty has a lot to do with powerlessness. Many working in these NGOs have concluded that development projects are more successful "if they are based on people's own analysis of the problems they face and their solutions." In essence, this suggests an approach to participation, representation and collective action, where political action on a national or even international stage is necessary. This challenges the elitist ideology of meritocracy, so powerful in the Singapore case, which is used to justify selective functional representation in the political process. It also makes it imperative for such NGOs to try to
expand political space. In Southeast Asia this has involved the building of coalitions with religious and women's groups, environmentalists, trade unions and others attempting to shape public policy.

This last observation leads to the point that, despite the continued difficulties for independent trade unions throughout Southeast Asia, they have not been completely blunted. Rising labour activism in Indonesia attests to this, with trade unions like the PPBI (Centre for Working Class Struggles) and the SBSI (Indonesian Prosperous Workers' Union) playing a critical role. Importantly, though, this has been one component of an increasing breadth of oppositional forces, particularly within Indonesia but generally throughout the region. Growing links between the student and labour movements in Indonesia are expressed through the activities of such organizations as the PPBI and the YMB (Foundation for Mutual Progress), for example. Together with developmental NGOs like the SISBIKUM and YAKOMA they complicate the New Order's corporatist designs for labour, albeit under constant threat of repressive reprisals from the state. The student movement in Indonesia, whose potential ranks are bolstered by the expansion of the middle class, is also integrating itself with peasant organizations via a range of NGOs involved in social and economic development. But if the urban middle class in Indonesia is increasingly forming political coalitions with less-privileged sectors, and even playing a strategic role in this coalition, these links are nevertheless still ad hoc, often clandestine, and insecure.

In neighbouring Malaysia, while a comparable alliance between the student and labour movements is absent, the urban middle class is however a limited force for the broadening of political contestation. Here we see significant middle-class involvement and leadership in what attempts have been made to open up the space of civil society. Lawyers and other professionals have attempted to advance concerns about civil rights, environmental degradation, women's rights, corruption, and the social consequences of economic development. Prominent independent organizations trying to influence public policy, wherein the middle class plays a strategic role, include Ailarn, the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia, Selangor Graduates Society, Consumer Association of Penang, National Council of Women's Organizations, and the Association of Women Lawyers.

Recent Southeast Asian history contains some striking illustrations of the potential for NGOs to play decisive political roles when circumstances are favourable. In Thailand, for example, NGOs played leading and coordinating roles in the events of 1991 and 1992 which eventually led to the demise of a military government. Earlier, in 1986, NGOs played a similar role in overthrowing the Marcos regime. Notwithstanding this, NGO activity remains modest in Southeast Asia when viewed alongside South Korea and Taiwan. In both these East Asian societies, consumer, environmental, human rights, women's, student, and social justice movements have fuelled remarkable social and political dynamics. Between 1990 and 1995, hundreds of NGOs emerged in South Korea where there are now more than twenty environmental organizations alone. Significantly, in both South Korea and Taiwan, these important organizations in the mobilization of popular opinion have eschewed links with political parties, even though the latter have a more important role to play in the competition for power than their counterparts in Southeast Asia. So the sharp separation of party politics from broader social and political life is a feature across East and Southeast Asia.

The point to emphasize here, however, is that while NGOs and social movements may be less influential in Southeast Asia, they nevertheless are in existence and they may yet have a greater impact if the assorted mechanisms of co-option fail to accommodate emerging social forces. Furthermore, as capitalist industrialization advances in Southeast Asia, issues relating to income distribution, pollution, public transport and other social infrastructure are likely to loom larger. It remains to be seen how effective corporatist structures will be in addressing or defusing these issues. At the very least, it would seem that structures to actually ascertain diverse social opinion are necessary to give any semblance of credibility to the idea by authoritarian leaders that public policy is arrived at by consensus rather than contestation. This in itself would involve significant political change.

Promoting Civil Society in Southeast Asia

During the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, attempts by governments from established liberal democracies to thwart communism included assistance to assorted social, political and cultural organizations in developing countries. Although this was invariably presented as the promotion of "democracy," often the central object was defensive. The US government, in particular, expended considerable sums in political aid abroad in an attempt to limit the impact of communism in trade union movements. West German political foundations were also active in supporting the development of NGOs that could counter communist influence. However, since the mid-late 1980s, with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of various authoritarian regimes around the world, we have witnessed more offensive strategies to promote liberal democracy which pay greater attention to the factors underlying its success.

Much of this stems from a recognition of the tenuous state of parliamentary democracy in various post-authoritarian societies in Latin America and Asia. The development of liberal democracy, its advocates have come to understand, requires more than the institutionalization of formal elections and political parties. It requires a civil society, not just to service political parties but to broadly institutionalize political competition and representation. Thus, international assistance for "democratization" has not only increased considerably in the 1990s, it has also moved from programs to promote free and fair elections, the drafting of constitutions and the development of political parties to include
a wide range of activities and institutions. This includes human rights groups, independent media, business and professional organizations, trade unions, cooperatives, environmental organizations, women's organizations and legal institutions.

Apart from the US and Germany, the governments of Canada, Great Britain and France are all devoting increased resources to the promotion of institutions that are seen to underscore liberal democracy. Since 1990, the US government has annually spent between $300 and $500 million a year on such programs. But what instruction can we take from the above analysis of changing state-society relations in Southeast Asia for attempts to promote civil society and democracy through such expenditures and programs? And what in particular might be the implications of this analysis for aid that is intended to assist with the emergence of a liberal civil society in particular?

There are three major points arising out of the above discussion and analysis with implications for civil society and its possible promotion in Southeast Asia. First, the possibility exists that in Southeast Asia co-option will effectively incorporate into the state sufficient representation of interests to obviate the need for any significant civil society at all. However, where the opportunity exists, the promotion of civil society requires the establishment of independent organizations whose overt political influence the state either comes to accept or tolerate. Second, if a liberal civil society is an objective, then not all independent organizations warrant support since they vary in their political complexion and implications. Due to their contrasting natures and objectives, some NGOs constitute a force for liberal democracy by virtue of their democratic internal practices and values, while others, characterized by elitist ideologies and agendas, may even pose a threat to it. Third, a possible scenario in Southeast Asia is for independent political space to be selectively sanctioned, opening up opportunities for business and professional groups but excluding independent representation of the underprivileged in particular. NGOs which give political expression to the underprivileged are thus important to ensuring that civil society is broadly responsive to the diversity of interests in society. Given that large sections of the populations of Southeast Asia lie outside the professional and business classes without effective, independent social and political organization, support in this area could play a strategic role in fostering liberal civil societies.

On this third point, it has been argued above that some NGOs engaged in social and economic development have assumed a significant role in partnership with, or advocacy of, the underprivileged. Most importantly, they have advanced the idea that the political process must be responsive to the legitimate interests of those affected by government policy and the exercise of state power, and must not simply be the preserve of those with technical expertise or professional credentials. Aid organizations around the world have increasingly recognized this important political function of certain NGOs. Globally, 14 percent of aid to developing countries is now channelled through NGOs. However, as can be illustrated from recent Australian experience, sometimes foreign policy objectives exert competing pressures on aid programs which are resolved to the detriment of civil society's promotion.

Although allocations to NGOs are still only a small proportion of the aid from Australian sources, the government agency AusAID (formerly AIDAB) nevertheless recognizes both the potential of certain NGOs to assist with the development of civil society, and the importance of this broad political objective. It thus emphasizes the value of participatory development, defined as "a process by which people take an active and influential role in shaping decisions which shape their lives. It strengthens civil society by empowering communities and individuals, thus influencing public policy and providing a check on the power of government." As noted, this has previously been a role attempted by trade unions but their repression and co-option throughout much of Southeast Asia has militated against this in the contemporary period. Where the opportunity exists, however, the development of independent trade unions can make a strategic contribution to the broadening of civil society. Yet, the Australian government committed itself in May 1994 to a workers' education program through the International Labour Organization (ILO) involving sectoral trade unions in Indonesia. These unions are aligned with the Indonesian government through the umbrella labour organization Serikat Pekerja Seruh Indonesia (All Indonesian Workers' Union) (SPSI). The project was intended to start in April 1995 and ran for a period of four years, involving the sum of A$1.4 million from the donor country via AusAID.

Not surprisingly, this aroused criticism within Australia and Indonesia, not only of the Australian government but the leadership of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). The ACTU was consulted about the project and involved in a preliminary study visit to Indonesia in January and February 1993 to report on industrial relations in that country. A former ACTU officer was employed in Jakarta to assist with the program's implementation. NGOs in Indonesia were especially critical of the Australian government and the ACTU and formed the Committee Against ACTU-SPSI Relations. In protest to the Australian ambassador for Indonesia and the president of the ACTU, the chairperson of Yayasan Lombaga Bantuah Hakam Indonesia (Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation), Adnan Buyung Nasution, emphasized that because "the continuing role SPSI plays in controlling labour, we believe that this program may in fact undermine efforts by labour activists and NGOs to build a genuine independent trade union." Nasution also complained to the Australian ambassador for Indonesia that, in operating within the Pancasila Industrial Relations ideological framework of the Indonesian state, there is no recognition of competing interests between workers and employers and the pursuit of so-called mutual benefit under this system amounted to a containment of workers'
demands for better wages and conditions. Through various forms of harassment and intimidation, the Indonesian government has actively undermined opportunities for independent unions. Meanwhile, Nasution argues, “SFST is allowed to monopolise the mechanism of collective bargaining and is therefore, little more than a tool of the government for controlling the struggle for workers [sic] rights in Indonesia.”

For the Labor government, with which the ACTU worked closely during its period in office from 1983 to early 1996, the project represented an expression of good will to its Indonesian counterpart which has a poor international reputation for labour relations. Particularly under the leadership of Paul Keating, the Labor government made strenuous attempts to improve and consolidate diplomatic relations with the Soeharto regime. A close, cooperative relationship with Indonesia was a central plank in designs to achieve more comprehensive economic integration between Australia and Asia. However, critical public opinion in Australia over the annexation of East Timor and human rights issues in Indonesia has continually complicated the bilateral relationship. One of the stated rationales for the Australian involvement was, according to the Executive Project Summary from the Australian Agency for International Development, that “the use of AusAID funding will provide a high recognition through workplaces in Indonesia of Australia’s inputs — which could result in the expansion of Australian trade with Indonesia.”

There are real strictures on the funding of labour organisations in Indonesia. Indonesian officials insist that ILO or any other funds can only be directed to organisations which involve a three-way social partnership between government, workers and employers. While some aid organisations covertly circumnavigate this to some extent, this is a difficult basis for operating. However, actively supporting corporatist labour organisations in Indonesia does have the effect of enhancing their legitimacy and capacity vis-à-vis genuinely independent trade unions. Wittingly or not, this sort of assistance runs the risk of increasing the obstacles to a liberal civil society. As it transpired, and for reasons totally unrelated to such considerations, the new Liberal-National Party government that came to office in March 1996 abandoned the project.

**Conclusion**

For historical reasons, social, political and economic developments in Southeast Asia necessarily contrast in certain respects from those of the earlier industrializers of Europe and North America. But claims that Asian cultural predispositions render competitive political processes unworkable in East and Southeast Asia are a different matter. Such claims must themselves be put in historical context — a context of growing and increasingly complex political pressures on authoritarianism in East and Southeast Asia. In the past, tight political controls were rationalized by authoritarian leaderships in much of developing Asia as a necessary but temporary trade-off to enable economic development to take root.

But with the economic transformation of Asia, this argument is much less tenable, especially as it has brought with it greater social complexity and associated pressures for political pluralism. Authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia is facing challenge. A variety of NGOs are emerging, including organizations that actively promote the interests of social groups adversely affected by the inequalities of the market economy. Their continued exclusion from the political process underlines claims of an “Asian” alternative to liberal democracy based on consensual politics. It remains to be seen whether this sort of exclusion will prove politically effective over the longer term.

As industrial revolutions in Southeast Asia mature, there will be increased differentiation in state-society relations across the region — with the extent and character of civil society a critical element of this differentiation. Growing social complexity and social frictions inherent to market economies will necessitate increased political sophistication for authoritarian regimes to survive, but will not guarantee the demise of such regimes. Indeed, not all of the pressures for political change lead in the direction of liberal democracy or a liberal civil society. Thus, authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia may be able to reach accommodations with some groups — either by extending the mechanisms of state co-option or by selectively opening up the space of civil society — without fundamental political change. In other words, wider political participation might in some cases be reconciled with the consolidation of hierarchical and elitist political structures.

In such a scenario, major sections of society would remain politically marginalized. It is only with the establishment of a liberal civil society that more inclusive and competitive political processes are possible. Strategies dedicated to this end need to focus on the promotion of political representation which is broad-based, independent of the state, and which asserts the rights of citizens to influence decisions affecting their lives.
Notes


3. Ibid., p. 7.


7. Ibid., pp. 35–36.


27. Ibid.


31. Ibid.
38. Australian Agency for International Development, Jakarta, Executive Project Summary, 10 January 1996.
40. Correspondence to Allan Taylor, Australian Ambassador for Indonesia 27 October 1994.
41. Australian Agency for International Development, Jakarta, Executive Project Summary, 10 January 1996, p. 3.