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SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Left and the rise of bourgeois opposition

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There can be little doubt that conservative elements associated with the political Right have been the dominant political influence in Southeast Asia since the end of colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s. It is true that the Left and related progressive forces have exerted important influences at particular times. However, it is apparent that their agendas of radical social, economic and political transformation have been subordinated to those promoting capitalist economic development, essentially conservative politics and hierarchical social structures as specified in various other chapters of this volume.

In this chapter we seek to outline the significance of the Left as well as its political demise following a period from about the 1930s to the early 1980s when socialist and communist parties were most active and significant. For the more recent period we outline how the political space occupied by these movements has come to be occupied by broad social democratic movements. In this category we include a range of liberal social movements, civil society organizations (CSOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have promoted a politics associated with human rights, environment, media freedom, rural livelihoods and other causes directly or indirectly championing citizenship rights of one sort or another.

In other words, from a period where Left and progressive politics was associated with radical socio-economic and political transformation, this has been replaced with activism that is supportive of enhanced protection for civil and individual rights and collective goods such as the environment. Whereas progressive politics was once opposed to conservative or reactionary ideologies and sought to oust conservative and military governments, in contemporary Southeast Asia, the NGOs noted above are more likely to operate without seeking to fundamentally transform the established political order. In Southeast Asia, over most of the period we discuss, progressive politics opposed colonialism, held generalized notions about egalitarianism and social solidarity, and worked against authoritarian and military-based regimes. While socialists and communists generally adopted class analysis when analysing society and sought to oppose capitalism, bourgeois activists were more interested in reforms that brought classes together within the capitalist economic system in a way that guaranteed certain rights. These basic definitions underpin the following discussion.

Socialist and communist movements had their greatest influence during the nationalist struggles from the 1930s and following the Second World War. In these struggles coalitions of workers, peasants and nationalists became indispensable elements of the anti-colonial movements.
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In particular, the communists often provided organizational strength to the independence movements. While there were both links and divisions between the Left and other nationalist parties with, for example, the largest communist party in Asia in Indonesia, for a time the prospects for socialism in Southeast Asia seemed promising. However, as will be shown, despite taking power in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1974–5, the political influence of communist and socialist movements and ideas of egalitarianism have declined across the region. To a degree, the political gap left by this decline has been filled by a bourgeois, often liberal, opposition seen in the social democratic forces noted above.

Self-proclaimed Leftist political movements continue to exist as legal or underground groups or parties in the region, and some have even been revitalized in recent times, as in Thailand in 2009–10 (see below). However, as capitalist development deepens – even in Vietnam and Laos where communist parties remain in power – the Left has substantially declined.

In this chapter it is argued that the momentum for the expansion of a non-state political space was established through the activism of the organized Left. 2 This political space, and the influence of the Left, has ebbed and flowed as first colonial and then authoritarian states repressed political expression. The chapter examines this process through a broad historical account, focusing on the Left and a range of other non-state groups that have sought to extend the space available for political activity. This discussion follows a brief account of the theoretical underpinnings of the emergence of a ‘politicized’ civil society, not as any natural outcome or as an end point in a process of economic and political development, but as the product of a constantly evolving context over the extent and nature of political space. Integral to this context are competing preferences for who should be represented in the political process and how.

Civil society, political space and political oppositions

In the discussion of political space in Southeast Asia the emergence of ‘civil society’ is often seen as a recent phenomenon born of the development of middle classes. This position discounts the political struggles of earlier decades. Earlier contests for non-state or independent political space were usually repressed by colonial and post-colonial authoritarian governments, but re-emerged, reinvigorated. In short, contemporary civil society in Southeast Asia is neither new nor the result of an evolutionary transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

Civil society is no simple category. It has a meaning deeply rooted in the development of capitalism and the end of absolutism in Western Europe (Brook 1997: 19–20). The forces unleashed by these processes saw the rise of counter-elites that often sought to reduce the political weight of the state (see Bernhard 1993: 307–11). For Southeast Asia, this historical context is not without parallels, although the fit is not always straightforward. For example, Steinberg (1997) has observed that civil society has to be narrowly defined for contemporary Burma, where the military has ruled since 1962. He argued that civil society is:

composed of those non-ephemeral organizations of individuals banded together for a common purpose or purposes to pursue those interests through group activities and by peaceful means. These are generally non-profit organizations, and may be local or national, advocacy or supportive, religious, cultural, social, professional, educational, or even organizations that, while not for profit, support the business sector, such as chambers of commerce, trade associations, etc.

Many analysts would accept this definition. Yet it may be too broad for the meaningful analysis of politics, political activism and regime change. For example, Ngok (2007: 10) has argued for
attention to 'political society' while Thayer (2009) writes of 'political civil society'. This approach acknowledges the development of NGOs, CBOs and even government-sponsored civic associations. However, it turns analytic attention to essentially 'non-violent political, advocacy, labour and religious organizations and movements that seek to promote human rights and democratization in authoritarian states' (Thayer 2009: 1–2).

In this narrower context, Bernhard (1993: 307) provides a useful account, specifying that civil society 'constitutes the sphere of autonomy from which political forces representing constellations of interests in society have contested state power'. His emphasis on contesting state power is an important addition to these definitions. In any society there will be organizations that are relatively autonomous but which engage in activities that are non-political. Examples of such civic organizations include sporting clubs and charitable associations. At the same time, the emphasis in Thayer's definition on non-violence and activism against authoritarian states is unwarranted. The struggle for political space, whether with authoritarian or democratic regimes, will at times be violent.

Groups that are politically active usually include political parties and organizations, trade unions, employer and professional associations, women's groups, student organizations, peasant and ethnic associations, politically activist NGOs, CBOs and social movements. Groups such as these are seeking to create what Bernhard (1993: 308) identifies as a 'public space'. He emphasizes that, in the European context, these groups were able to 'autonomously organize themselves outside the dominant official political sphere and to compel the state through political struggles to recognize and respect their existence'. It would be rare for such groups to be spawned by the state but by their activism they exist in a relationship with the state.

As indicated by Steinberg (1997), claiming that civil society is politically organized is itself controversial. Several well-cited authorities conceive of civil society as any organization that exists outside the state. This is most commonly seen in modernization perspectives (see Pye 1990; Huntington 1991). This approach presumes a causal link between economic development and political change, arguing that a breakdown of authoritarian rule was inevitable – even if protracted and mediated by assorted factors – as economic growth promoted the growth of middle and business classes that would eventually mean the development of a vibrant civil society. These changes meant an unavoidable conflict with authoritarian states that would eventually see democracy take root.

This equation of capitalist development with a more lively civil society has been a common assumption for Southeast Asia (for example, Gifling 1988). However, as the cases of Singapore and China suggest, a strong capitalism does not always see the emergence of a strong civil society or political democracy. This failure has resulted in modifications to the modernization perspective that seek to explain the emergence of civil society in terms of 'social capital' and 'networks' being prerequisites for the emergence of a 'trust' that is assumed necessary for CSOs to emerge (Richmond 2006: 18–19). This approach leads to a political archaeology that seeks to reveal the cultural prerequisites of democratization and civil society.

This approach also results in a romantic view of civil society. Where civil society emerges, it is seen as the natural domain of individual and group freedoms, contrasted with the state's coercive institutions and relationships. However, as Rodan (1996) has argued, civil society is not a socially atomized entity, for it is reflective of the divisions that exist in any society. Because civil society is divided, a site of struggles over power, and is linked to state power, CSOs are likely to reflect these divisions and contests. This means that civil society groups will not all seek to advance liberal or democratic political positions.

A further misleading implication of this modernization approach is that a 'strong state' must mean a 'weak civil society', thus diminishing the range of possible configurations of state–civil society relations. Likewise, there is an unwarranted perception that the emergence of civil
society is an historical end point. As will be shown below, political space is variable and a product of the interplay of political activism, the state and the classes that dominate it. CSOs can expand political contestation beyond narrow bases in formal political structures but as Rueck-Schemeyer and colleagues (1992: 49) observe, where ‘powerful and cohesive upper classes’ dominate CSOs, they may serve as conduits of authoritarian ideologies, thus weakening democracy’. For all of this, it is true that autonomous activism remains critical for organizing the strength of subaltern classes as they struggle against the hegemony of dominant classes and state. This is precisely why there has been a privileging of certain types of CSOs in state-society engagements involving various regimes in Southeast Asia, in an attempt to enhance political participation while reducing contestation (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007).

CSOs must have a relationship with the state. As Bernhard (1993: 326) points out, CSO autonomy must be legally sanctioned by the state. It is the state that establishes the boundaries that define the relatively autonomous space for political organizing. These boundaries are meant to protect that space from the state’s own interference. Hence it is the state that defines what is to be considered ‘political’ and ‘legitimate’ even if this process involves considerable contestation. In return for the granting of independent political space and the protection it affords, the organizations occupying it must engage in self-discipline. This might mean eschewing the harnessing of class-based mass organizations (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2009) and, in capitalist societies, results in bourgeois political activism.

It is clear that the emergence of ‘civil society’ cannot be understood as a natural opposite to an authoritarian state or as being separated from capitalist relations of exploitation and domination (Wood 1991: 74). Social pluralism does not invariably translate into political pluralism and democracy and activist organizations can co-exist with authoritarian regimes (Bernhard 1993: 326). Independent and organized political activism is but one form of political space that may be able to accommodate greater social pluralism. Increasingly, authoritarian regimes develop creative institutional and ideological initiatives to expand political space within the state (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2007; Rodan 2009).

In the following discussion of Southeast Asia, rather than equating the birth and development of civil society with the coupling of capitalism and democracy, the analysis is of the ebb and flow of independent political space generated by extended political struggle as it is shaped by the state and class forces. This approach permits attention to history and to the role of Left political movements in expanding independent political space.

A brief history of political space in Southeast Asia

The emergence of independent political space or civil society is usually considered to be either a late colonial or modern phenomenon. For the pre-colonial period, it is argued that there was a unity of state, society and economy as rulers sought to maintain order and security through the control of the symbolic and spiritual (for example, Taylor 2009: 67–83). This view of an unchanging pre-colonial period ignores ubiquitous class and status conflicts. Even so, it is clear that imperialism and colonialism confronted indigenous political structures with new ideas about science, economics and politics that challenged the old orders. Importantly, colonial rule resulted in new ideas about how society could be organized and managed.

Some of these ideas involved socialism, communism and nationalism, often in combination, and organized into ideologies that drove anti-colonial movements. For Marxists, the rise of nationalism was both a challenge and an opportunity. For example, Lenin’s Imperialism proved a powerful document for those opposing colonialism. Writing in 1913, Lenin recognized the potential for revolution in Asia (see Gafurov and Kim 1978: 385). Marxism arrived in Southeast
Asia by numerous routes, involving internationally linked labour organizations, intellectuals and organizing by international communists like Ho Chi Minh and Tan Malaka.

It is not possible, in a short chapter, to provide a full account of the ebb and flow of independent political space in five countries of Southeast Asia over a period of some eight decades. Rather, broad slices will be made through the modern history of Southeast Asia, beginning from the 1920s.

Anti-colonialism and political space

In the century up to the 1920s, the colonial governments of Southeast Asia and the (colonial-like) Thai state instituted centralized and bureaucratized administrations, roughly marked out the geographic boundaries of colonies and future nation-states, and established imperial systems of law and order (Ileto 1999; Trocki 1999). There was considerable opposition to the economic and political changes associated with colonialism. For example, as the British took Upper Burma in 1886, there was widespread rebellion resulting in ruthless repression and a large-scale relocation of people. Such events saw the rise of 'patriotism' as an oppositional form (Myint-U 2001: 200–4). With colonial structures developing in place of, on top of and around indigenous structures, further political changes saw the emergence of insistent demands for new political space. This space was sometimes granted by the colonial state but was always limited and carefully policed.

In the era of high colonialism, local economies had been reoriented to the demands of mercantilism, with trade in commodities dominating the economic relationship with the West. An important requirement of colonial rule was for a new, largely indigenous, administrative class. This was the class of 'essential collaborators', schooled in the colonial system, that some of the more radical nationalists came to see as 'bloodsuckers' (Owen 2005: 210, 212). There was a related emergence of 'middle class' occupational groups associated with economic change and political activity became focused on urban areas and a flowering of civic organizations. Throughout Southeast Asia a large number of usually urban-based civic associations emerged to further the interests of local people as well as the large immigrant communities of Chinese and Indians (see Owen 2005: 259–60 on Burma; Skinner 1958 on Siam; and Weiss 2003: 19–22 on Malaya). These groups were not usually overtly political, attending to social and cultural affairs, but could become politicized and were often utilized by the state in managing immigrant communities. Overtly political organizations also developed. According to Taylor (2009: 156), the Karen National Association, formed in 1881, was the first 'Western-style voluntary political organization in Burma's history'. It was probably the first nationalist political association in Southeast Asia.

Much of the political activism that emerged challenged the inequities and contradictions inherent in colonial policies and administration. The governments of the time were unrepresentative, either as an absolutist monarchy in Thailand or as colonial administrations. By the 1920s, a political renaissance resulted in considerable ferment and activism. Labour organizing expanded, newspapers and magazines expanded and nationalist agitation persisted. This tumult saw concerted demand for expanded political space and independence (Pluvier 1974: 15–21, 72–9, 121).

Nationalist ideas took hold everywhere. In British Burma, the Young Men's Buddhist Association became the General Council of Burmese Associations in 1920, and agitated against colonialism across the country (Kratoska and Batson 1999: 282–3). In the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), a plethora of associations were politicized, especially student groups and religious organizations. Several religious groups in Dutch Indonesia and British Malaya were influenced by the anti-colonial sentiment of Islamic reform movements in the Middle East (Steinberg et al.
1971: 275–8, 326). Colonial regimes reacted in various ways including co-opting, allowing limited political development and, as often as not, repression.

As capitalism developed, separate employer and employee organizations tended to split ethnic Chinese communities. Labour activism increased substantially, some of it associated with political change in China (on Malaya, see Stenson 1970; on Thailand, see Brown 2004). Worker organization was particularly threatening for colonial administrators, with Trocki (1999: 85) noting that the creation of various 'security forces, secret police organizations and spy networks' was to suppress unions and other political movements. Colonial and Thai authorities viewed labour unions as especially threatening when linked with socialist, communist and republican opposition. While unions remained small, they operated in critical economic sectors such as ports, transport and mills.

From the early 1920s, socialist and communist organizations gained strength. For example, the Communist Party of Indonesia (later, Partai Komunis Indonesia, or PKI) was formed in 1920. In concert with developments in Vietnam and China, communist organisations were soon founded throughout the region, and many trade unions came under Left influence (van der Kroef 1988: 4–7; Cribb 1985: 251). Some of this early communist activity was related to the establishment of the Third International (Comintern) in 1919 and Soviet foreign policy. The Comintern had debated the relationship between communist parties and anti-colonialism, with Lenin calling for alliances with nationalist movements. Arguably, though, local conditions played a more significant role in developing the Left. The PKI adopted a revolutionary strategy that emphasized the anti-colonial struggle (Knight 1985: 53–9). Other communist and socialist parties followed suit.

The period saw considerable labour organizing and activism. In Thailand, labour activists established a workers' newspaper during a strike in 1923. The workers behind the strike and the newspaper soon became active in broader political struggles seeking to unseat the absolute monarchy (Brown 2004: Ch. 2). Labour movements were often embedded in an ethnic division of labour, and when labour, ethnicity and organized communism converged, the colonial and Thai states felt most threatened. For example, vernacular Chinese schools throughout the region were caught up in the political movements in China and became important recruiting grounds for the Left (Kasian 2001). The Communist Youth League in Singapore was established in 1926, with a strong base in schools. A similar pattern was seen in Thailand and Malaya, where authorities closed Chinese schools for political reasons.

The Left's political fortunes were boosted during the Great Depression. In Singapore, the Comintern-inspired South Seas General Labour Union, established in 1926, gained political traction during the economic downturn. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP), established in 1930 with a Singapore base, found the downturn in mining and plantations provided its affiliated unions with considerable impetus. A campaign to mobilize labour saw the Malayan General Labour Union formed in 1934 as the unions became a base for political activism (Sturmer 1965: 223). In the Philippines, the opposition and independence movements expanded during the depression. The Socialist Party formed in 1929 with a nationalist stand and its own labour organization. Supporting peasants and workers, the Party ran in elections and increased its support between 1933 and 1937. The Communist Party (Partido Komunista ng Philippine, or PKP) was established in 1930, but went underground when banned in 1931. In 1938, the Socialist and Communist parties merged in an anti-fascist front (Kerkvliet 1977: 1–60; Richardson 1993: 386). Similar patterns of Left-oriented political activism were seen throughout Southeast Asia.

By the late 1930s, the communist and socialist movements that had emerged were all influenced by, and influential on, growing anti-imperialist movements and shared a distrust of
Western liberalism and capitalism (Golay et al. 1969: 18). The Left had contributed to and benefited from the independent political space of the 1920s and 1930s. However, as World War II approached, authorities attempted to curtail political activism. In Thailand, the military was in control and moved closer to fascist regimes in Europe and Japan. The colonial state in Singapore and Malaya, threatened by communism, crushed the CPM in 1931, but soon faced communist-led worker opposition in the mid-1930s (Stanier 1965: 237).

One important element of the anti-colonial movement in Indonesia was that of Islamic traders and landowning classes under threat from Chinese business. They blamed the colonial government in part for this situation, demanding protection and subsidy for domestic/indigenous business. Another important element was that of middle-class professionals in the PNI who mobilised mass support and led the anti-colonial war in the 1940s.

**Post-war/Cold War**

During World War II, while some nationalist movements accepted Japanese attacks on Western colonialism and lined up with them in opposing colonial masters, the communists generally opposed the Japanese. In several places, including Malaysia and Vietnam, the Allies supported the communist resistance against the Japanese. The early defeats inflicted on the Western colonial masters by the Japanese gave strength and impetus to anti-colonial movements. The Japanese also vigorously suppressed communist movements. In Malaya, Singapore, Indochina and the Philippines, communists led or were major elements of anti-Japanese movements (Plouvier 1974: 286–311). In Burma, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League was founded in 1944 as an anti-Japanese resistance force encompassing Aung San’s Burma National Army, the Communist Party and what became the Socialist Party (see Hewson and Prager Nyein 2010). The communists gained credibility by leading anti-Japanese movements. At the end of the war these movements were in a strong and popular position, and the link between nationalism and communism was well-established.

Following the war, Southeast Asia experienced a short period of relative political openness, with nationalists and the organized Left leading the drive to independence. Decolonization was generally supported by the United States and the USSR. However, while the British were decolonizing in South Asia, they seemed keen to re-establish colonial regimes in Southeast Asia. Not only did they do this in their own colonies, but they supported the re-establishment of colonial regimes in Indochina and Indonesia (Stockwell 1999: 353). For nationalists, and this included most on the Left, anti-colonialism was the major political issue, with a stentent anti-Western tone.

Further, the increased international influence of the USSR was cause for optimism on the part of Southeast Asian communists. As a founding power of the United Nations, the USSR provided political support to local communists. For example, when Thailand wanted to join the UN in 1946, it required Soviet support. The USSR sought and received the repeal of Thailand’s anti-Communist laws (Insor 1963: 90). Many communists were also heartened by the progress of communist parties in Indochina and China. Another support for the Left was the impetus given to centralized economic planning by Soviet economic and war success and, ironically, the Marshall Plan for reconstruction in Europe. The Left had long argued for industrialization through government investments, and planning and economic nationalism became a central pillar of industrialization strategies (Golay et al. 1969: 453). This was seen in Burma, Indonesia and, in a more limited way, Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines (Golay et al. 1969: 119–24).

The socialist movement — much of it anti-communist — also made gains. Calling for an ‘Asian socialism’, Burmese Prime Minister U Ba Swe called for revolutionary democratic Socialist
methods to improve the standard of living of the masses' in Southeast Asia. Opposed to capitalism because of its links with colonialism and to communism as a form of totalitarianism, 'Asian socialism' was nationalist, supported state social welfare and saw itself as 'democratic, egalitarian and fraternal' (Josey 1957).

By 1950, the broad Left of socialists and communists in Southeast Asia must have felt that the tide of history was in their favour. The Philippines and Indonesia had gained their independence, albeit by quite different routes, the Chinese communists were in power, the situation in Indochina was in the balance; communists had launched armed struggles or rebellions in Malaya and Singapore, the Philippines (the Hukbalahap movement), Indonesia, and Burma (see van der Kroef 1980: 25–32). In Indonesia, the PKI believed that ‘the national movement, and later the national state, might be captured by Marxism through peaceful means and, having been captured ideologically, would naturally admit Marxists to positions of power’ (Cribb 1985: 259). Meanwhile, in Malaya, the Communist Party had abandoned peaceful and constitutional opposition to the reinstatement of colonialism and had embarked on armed struggle. In other places, the Left had made political gains as worker and peasant unrest developed. By 1947, for example, MCP-dominated unions controlled three-quarters of the organized work force in Singapore, while in Thailand labour organization increased, and a new generation of leaders, influenced by Marxism and close to the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), emerged. The PKI also had strong links with labour (Golay et al. 1969: 198–99; Senson 1970: 11–80; Hewison and Brown 1994).

The success of labour organizing can be seen as a part of the rise of a more generalized Leftist discourse in the region. As Reynolds (1987: 25) has observed for Thailand, ‘there was a distinctly Left orientation in Bangkok public discourse for a decade or so after World War II’. In Malaya and Singapore, radical unions played a critical role in mobilizing a broad movement of students, workers and formal political parties. Leftist discourse, especially in labour circles, employed concepts of class, class struggle and exploitation, challenging capitalism, colonialism and bourgeois nationalism. As labour activism deepened, governments sought to curtail certain forms of political representation and mobilization and targeted key socialist and communist organizations. Anti-communist laws became increasingly draconian. For example, in Thailand, the 1952 Anti-Communist Act prevented criticism of the private enterprise system and outlawed acts defined as 'creating instability, disunity, or hatred among the people, and taking part in acts of terrorism or sabotage' (Reynolds 1987: 28).

From this time, the fortunes of the Left became increasingly entangled with the geo-politics of the Cold War. The US and other Western powers, shocked by the 'loss' of China and Eastern Europe and the war in Korea, moved quickly to confront communism everywhere, including in Southeast Asia. The Cold War political agenda meant support for pro-Western and pro-business governments. Throughout Southeast Asia the US supported anti-communists. In Thailand, it supported Right-wing generals in the police and army. In Indochina, the US supported the French against the Viet Minh, before becoming militarily involved. Likewise, in Malaya, it supported the British in their anti-communist war. In Indonesia, the US championed the military against Sukarno and the PKI while it supported the nationalists in the Philippines against the Huk rebellion. At the same time, in Burma and Cambodia, the US undermined governments it considered 'dangerously neutral'.

This support for repressive political structures resulted in a remarkable narrowing of political space, even for democrats and nationalists. This anti-communist turn had a neat fit with authoritarian domestic agendas and often brutal repression. The organized Left was identified as 'alien' and as a 'fifth column' movement and found its organizations suppressed by authoritarian regimes that jailed and killed political opponents. Huge amounts of US aid supported this repression.
Challenging Cold War authoritarianism

By the end of the 1960s, almost all of the countries of the region were ruled by post-colonial regimes that were authoritarian and repressive. At the same time, communist-led armed struggles in the Philippines and Thailand were gaining strength, while the US intervention in Indochina was drawing to an inevitable close. The eventual victories for the communist movements in Indochina initially gave considerable impetus to the broad Left. In addition, political opposition to authoritarianism developed, much of it related to anti-imperialism and demands for new economic models.

In Singapore, for example, there was a short-lived revival of the student movement. University students had an agenda that included supporting workers and promoting civil liberties. The government cracked down, having student leaders arrested for ‘unlawful assembly’ and ‘rioting’, and putting student union funds under the control of the university and Ministry of Education. The student union was then prevented from engaging in political affairs. The involvement of students in struggles for expanded independent political space was a pattern throughout the region between 1968 and 1975. The breakaway Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines was formed by student leaders and intellectuals in 1968 and students were especially active until the introduction of martial law in 1972. In Indonesia and Thailand, students protested against Japanese economic imperialism. Joining peasants protesting falling prices, students in Malaysia demonstrated against the government in 1974, being subject then to considerable state repression (Ali 2008: 26). The most remarkable student activism was in Thailand, where students and intellectuals brought tens of thousands into the streets to overthrow a military dictatorship in 1973, only to be crushed by the military and Rightist forces in 1976 (see Morell and Chai-Anan 1981).

In part, student activism resulted from the massive expansion of tertiary education and the enormous social and economic changes taking place as a consequence of growth generated by import-substituting industrialization (see Anderson 1977). As noted above, radicalism suggested to authoritarian governments that students were manipulated by the Left. The result was repression and attempts to take control of student organizations. Of course, students did not operate in a political vacuum. They established solidarity groups with workers, peasants and the downtrodden and developed relationships with both the legal and underground Left. Thailand in 1973–6 is an example. Student–Left alliances succeeded in expanding political space but also prompted violent Rightist and state retaliation. In alliance with developing capitalist classes, governments again closed the political opening, and repressive regimes dominated the political stage throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s.

For the Left, facing increased repression, a glimmer of hope was seen in the self-declared socialist governments of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia and the expansion of communist-led rebellions in Thailand and the Philippines. But this came to nothing. In Cambodia, the Pol Pot regime embarked on a hyper-nationalist reign of terror which, while initially supported by some on the Left, was only concluded when Vietnam invaded in late 1978. One outcome of this was a brief but bloody war between China and Vietnam in 1979, which threw most of the organized Left in Southeast Asia into ideological confusion (see Evans and Rowley 1984). This confusion was amplified when the US and ASEAN began supporting their former enemy in the murderous Khmer Rouge against the forces that had thrown out the Pol Pot regime (Vickery 1986).

These intra-communist clashes had important impacts for communist movements in Southeast Asia. The CPT, which had been able to claim more than 15,000 fighters in its armed struggle, imploded. Allied to China, the CPT supported the Khmer Rouge and China, thereby losing
support from Vietnam and Laos. When it also lost China’s support as the Chinese leadership decided to support capitalist and repressive regimes in the region, the CPT was dead (see Chai-Anan et al. 1990). Armed struggle died out and it was really only in the Philippines that it continued, albeit with numerous splits amongst those on the Left (Reid 2000).

Changing patterns of international production also had a major impact on the nature of government in the region. The increased mobility of international capital saw a relocation of production to East and Southeast Asia. This movement was fostered by a shift from import-substitution to export-oriented and low-wage manufacturing. Keeping wages low and workers docile meant that unions were attacked and broken, further weakening the Left. Three other events contributed to this weakening: first, the move to capitalist production in China; second, the political and economic collapse of Eastern Europe; and third, the growing economic success of many of the capitalist Southeast Asian countries, while maintaining repressive political environments. By the mid-1980s, the future for Left and progressive forces seemed bleak.

**Civil society and bourgeois politics**

During the late 1980s and prior to the 1997–8 Asian economic crisis, further changes in the global political economy saw high-growth capitalist development further undercut socialism’s potential appeal in the region, providing low-paid production jobs (see Rodan et al. 2006). As the region became integral to global production chains, increased competition between economies, companies and workers developed. Significantly, in many countries, capitalist development has been achieved while maintaining political authoritarianism. Indeed, authoritarian political leaders in the region used economic success to boost political regime legitimacy and to justify repression.

In this context of a declining Left and a seemingly triumphant capitalism, progressive politics increasingly became associated with bourgeois reformism, seeking a capitalism that at least evidenced some concern for the weakest and poorest but where notions of egalitarianism, collectivism and revolution became fringe ideas. The result was a growing interest in limited political goals associated with human rights, liberty and representative forms of government – comparatively progressive ideas in a region where authoritarian governments remained politically repressive.

The growth of bourgeois reformism coincided with social and economic transformations that involved the expansion of capitalist and middle classes (see Robison and Goodman 1996). Capitalist development saw an ever more complex bourgeois class engaged in diverse domestic and global accumulation strategies. This generated new political aspirations and demands but did not necessarily result in progressive or even liberal politics. While modernization theorists had anticipated expanded political space, not all political space was independent space nor was it equally meaningful for different societal forces. While some argued that the development of business and professional organizations moved political power away from the state, structures emerged that limited rather than expanded political space, often involving the business elite and sections of middle class having close relations with the state and the organizations of the capitalist class (MacIntyre 1991; Anek 1992).

Meanwhile, the revitalization of NGOs and CSOs meant that, in some places, there was a push for an expanded political space. The demarcation of non-state political space should make political contestation more likely – even if, in order to avoid proscription and co-optation, confrontation is avoided. The most significant manifestation of contemporary political activism is seen in the NGOs that assign to themselves the representation of the ‘underprivileged’. At various times and locations, these organizations have been important mechanisms for expanding independent political space, engendering considerable enthusiasm for the political potential of
NGOs (see Clark 1991). However, over the past two decades, authoritarian states have been able to resist, co-opt or accommodate these reformist demands.

In authoritarian Singapore, from the 1980s, some groups emerged in the narrow space that existed. Notable were the Law Society, lay religious organizations, the Nature Society, the Association of Women for Action and Research, and the Association of Muslim Professionals (Rodan 1993). The evolution of these groups reflected a perception that existing political structures inadequately accommodated distinctive interests. It is clear that, since then, the Singapore government has embarked on a strategy to expand state-sponsored and state-controlled political space as an alternative to concessions on the extent and nature of independent civil society space. This has involved a range of new mechanisms for political consultation and feedback, inside and outside parliament, all of which are premised on acceptance of one-party rule (this ‘consultative authoritarianism’ is discussed in detail in Chapter 7). Meanwhile, tolerance for independent organizations has been conditional on their political roles remaining overt and limited, something that has generally been abided with. Like business organizations, the possibility of co-option and corporatism has meant that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish state and non-state organizations.

In military-run Burma, there was considerable optimism that, following Cyclone Nargis in 2008, developing NGOs and CSOs might be able to pry some limited political space away from the regime. However, not only did some of these organizations demonstrate a willingness to work closely with the regime, but the military regime continued to control all political space in the run-up to rigged elections in 2010 (see Hewison and Prager Nyein 2010).

Such examples do not exhaust the range of political activism undertaken by NGOs and social movements in Southeast Asia. In circumstances less authoritarian than those in Singapore and Burma, such organizations are operating outside the realm of party politics and in ways that distinguish them from the influence or lobby groups that are central in pluralist theory. They are activist and marshalling support from a range of groups and classes in society. That such organizations can be oppositional to authoritarian regimes has been demonstrated in the Philippines in 1986, where NGOs played a role in overthrowing the Marcos regime, and in Thailand, where they had a role in the 1991–2 events that led to the demise of a military-backed government.

When politics has been more open, as in the Philippines since 1986, Thailand from 1992 to 2006 and Indonesia from 1998, NGOs and CSOs have tended to act as a loyal opposition outside parliament. Significantly, though, many NGOs found that they needed to continue to challenge elected governments, supporting the poor and arguing for better representation and participation in policy making. This involved the building of oppositional coalitions between unions, development groups, women, religious groups and environmentalists. A good example of successful activism is seen in Malaysia, where the range of NGOs and CSOs has included steadfastly oppositional politics (Weiss and Hassan 2002; Weiss 2006).

At the same time, the social embeddedness of NGOs and CSOs was demonstrated in political events that followed the 1997–8 economic crisis. In the Philippines and Thailand, the economic downturn saw the emergence of political leaders who doubted the efficacy of the neo-liberal economic recovery prescriptions demanded by the IMF, World Bank, international corporations and Western and Japanese governments. In the Philippines, Joseph Estrada was elected president in a landslide in 1998 and touted anti-poverty policies and other ‘populist’ and pro-poor measures (De Castro 2007). In Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra gained the country’s biggest ever election victory in 2001 and introduced similar ‘populist’ policies that were so popular that he was re-elected in a landslide in 2005 (Hewison 2010a). Both elected leaders were opposed by middle-class and business groups and accused of corruption. Thaksin was also accused of
human rights abuses. In both cases, NGOs and CSOs joined with the elite and urban middle class in mounting street protests to bring down these elected and popular politicians. In Thailand, some of these organizations espoused elitist and anti-democratic politics, arguing for limited political rights that disadvantaged their own grassroots constituents (see Kengkij and Hewison 2009). The lesson of these events is that political action and contestation is built on class interests. Especially when lower classes challenge elite rule, the class nature of the organizations of civil society become apparent.

There is a tendency for analysts to view NGOs as naturally 'anti-state' because they are 'non-state'. This is naïve. In the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, NGOs have regularly been incorporated within the structures of local government and as service agencies (Jayasuriya and Hewison 2004; Reid 2005). This co-option by the state and international agencies like the World Bank has led to a debate over independence and political location (see Petras 1999). Class factors are at work, with most NGO leaders being drawn from urban intellectuals and middle-class groups, and while these leaders may work with the poor, this does not mean they are natural class allies of the downtrodden. NGO ideology may emphasize empowerment for the poor, disorganized and disenfranchised, their methodologies might claim to value participation, representation and collective action, and strategies that might expand political space, but NGOs inevitably reflect the class nature of the society in which they are embedded (see Petras 1999).

The most remarkable demonstration of the impact of class location has been in Thailand in 2009–10. Not only did many NGOs and CSOs oppose electoral outcomes that they deemed 'inappropriate', but they supported the repression of political movements associated with the poor and marginalized. In Thailand, these groups and their middle-class leaders campaigned with royalists, the military and a range of Right-wing groups to overturn electoral outcomes and then defeat the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), a movement that had the support of workers and small farmers. At the same time, Right-wing social movements formed to support elite rule and the defeat of electoral victors through street protest. The class antagonisms were dramatically demonstrated when the UDD began to mobilize around issues of inequality, injustice, class struggle and opposition to an 'aristocratic elite'. Many NGOs and CSOs rejected such rhetoric and expressed considerable opposition to grassroots organizing that they labelled as Left-wing or even communist (Kengkij and Hewison 2009; Hewison 2010b). They feared the UDD and its radical position, preferring that the UDD operate locally, dealing with local politics and local-level issues such as corruption (see Jacques-chai and Chanida 2010). This is about a reformism that tames and depoliticizes the UDD and its supporters.

Conclusion

In the early twenty-first century, it might have been hoped by liberals that the rapid maturation of capitalism would have delivered benefits sufficient to have made redundant the class-based politics of the Left in Southeast Asia. On the contrary, the social contradictions of market relations that manifest themselves in political contestation have become increasingly evident in recent years. Many of the ongoing conflicts in the region are fundamentally about the economic exploitation and political oppression maintained by political and economic elites. The resentment of the monopoly of economic and political power by the privileged classes is evident throughout the region. In this sense, while the social and economic contexts are vastly changed, many of the basic political conflicts remain focused on issues recognized by the Left decades ago.

The struggle for increased independent political space continues unabated, and in various countries this space remains remarkably narrow. Many of the emerging non-state organizations
have a class position predisposing them to limited forms of contestation with the state that entrenches political and economic privilege. In essence, these organizations promote reform of the existing political system rather than its transformation. Yet while the organized Left may barely exist in present-day Southeast Asia, the issues that have energized it for decades remain at the core of contemporary political and economic struggles. The historical development of capitalism in Southeast Asia has fostered powerful coalitions of interest institutionalized through state power, but that institutionalization requires continued refinement to ensure limits to political opposition are reproduced.

Notes

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2 For our earlier treatment of the Left and political development in Southeast Asia see Hewison and Rodan (1994).

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The Left and bourgeois opposition


