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2 Southeast Asian activism and limits to independent political space

Garry Rodan

The scope and nature of political space through which different interests and ideologies, including those of social activists, can influence the exercise of state power has been a matter of continuing and unresolved contention in Southeast Asia over the last thirty years. In its most spectacular form, this has resulted in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes – as in the Philippines in 1986, Thailand in 1992 and Indonesia in 1998. Elsewhere, the absence or failure of People Power movements has not prevented the expansion of political space for social activism – including within various authoritarian regimes, where both pockets of courageous independent activity and creative attempts at absorbing social activists into the state can be found. Despite this diversity, a remarkable feature of contemporary political developments across the region has been the disarticulation of civil society organizations (CSOs) from formal political institutions. Activists have often eschewed political parties, which have been less oriented towards programmatic agendas and more geared to serve as patronage machines (see Case 2002). Especially striking is the uniform weakness of working class-based organizations, which were crucial to expanding liberal democracy’s political space during its historic development in Western Europe. This has placed greater responsibility for advancing democratic change onto other organizations, and provided a context within which middle class-led organizations have been especially prominent in social activism of varying ideological orientations.

The channels through which political participation is conducted are sites of ideological struggle over competing ideas about political accountability and representation. CSOs filling the political vacuum left by weak working-class organizations and parties have been vehicles through which liberal, democratic and other ideologies have been promoted. Democracy’s emphasis is on institutionalizing the authority of citizens, to whom political decision makers must be held accountable (Urbinati 2000). Liberalism, by contrast, emphasizes the scrutiny, limiting and/or discipline of state power through statutory oversight regimes, market values and the rule of law to protect individual freedoms. Hence not all of the diverse range of advocacy, monitoring and service activities of these organizations – often working closely with local authorities or international aid agencies – entail an assertion of the primacy of citizens’ right to hold those in power to account. These ideological distinctions have also shaped the extent to which social activists have been able to...
achieve their objectives. The political space for middle class-led social activism oriented towards improving governance institutions, implementing development programmes and advancing individual political and civil liberties has, to differing degrees across Southeast Asia, opened up significantly in the last few decades. Yet avenues for collectively advancing social democratic reform agendas of economic redistribution and social equity, let alone more radical visions, have remained limited and ineffective. Cohesive reform movements have struggled to emerge even in the Philippines, which hosts the largest volume and range of CSOs in the region. There, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, political fragmentation of social activists is the order of the day, weakening the impact of democratic forces as they compete with other social activists to shape regimes.

Historical and structural factors loom large in accounting for both the high degree of political fragmentation among social activists and the pervasive role of the state in the formal and informal institutions through which such activism is typically channelled. Crucially, the shared Cold War legacies and historical context of capitalist development in Southeast Asia have laid broad foundations for state-dominated modes of political participation, which extend to democratic regimes. In the decimation of independent civil societies in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, trade unions and peasant organizations were especially targeted (Hewison and Rodan 1996). Difficulties in rebuilding these organizations have been compounded by accelerated capitalist globalization weakening the domestic bargaining power of unions. Thus, as the working classes expanded across most of the region, their independent collective organizational capacity did not (Deyo 2006; Hutchison and Brown 2001). Middle classes across the region have also emerged in a context of state dominance or strategic control of key sectors of domestic economies. This has shaped the size, complexion and interests of the middle class, not just through the generation of powerful bureaucracies but also through direct and indirect state control over access to employment and business contracts (Robison and Goodman 1996). And while international aid is a source of funds for many middle-class activists in Southeast Asia seeking to operate independently of the state (see Arroyo and Sirker 2005), it can foster a dependence of a different sort where access to resources is tied to aligning with reform agendas set by external agencies. Moreover, some of this funding leads back to partnerships with authorities and risks of political co-option.

The following discussion starts by outlining a conceptual framework distinguishing varying modes of political participation available to activists in Southeast Asia. At its core, this framework distinguishes between the presence and absence of independent collective political participation. Importantly, the framework countenances the dynamic coexistence of different modes within the one regime, as well as variability across Southeast Asia in the relative importance of any particular mode to the way a regime operates. Subsequent sections of the chapter examine select cases of independent and state-controlled modes of political participation. The chapter argues that in the latter, expanded political participation through state-controlled institutions affords control over who can participate and on what issues, narrowing the substantive issues open to contest
among social activists. An individualizing and compartmentalizing of political conflicts also reinforces the political fragmentation of social activists. Ideologically, it is not the political rights of citizens to be represented or to hold rulers to account that are principally advanced through these modes of participation, but notions of politics as fundamentally a technical and administrative exercise of problem solving requiring good governance institutions.¹

A framework for analysing social activism

Sophisticated analyses of the dynamic factors shaping opportunities for activists to engage in differing ‘repertoires’ of collective action are available in the literature (McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006). Less developed, however, is analysis of specific state and state-sponsored institutions and ideologies and their relationship to social activism. Towards a framework capturing the full range in state–civil society relationships, Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007) developed a matrix comprising four modes of participation outside direct electoral processes. The premise of this matrix is not that a sharp state–civil society dichotomy does or can exist – indeed, conflicts internal to both the state and civil society are seen as paramount to the character and potential for social activism (Rodan 1996) – but rather that different sites of political participation can matter for the way that conflict is managed, with implications for the nature of political space and the possibilities for reform. Moreover, none of these four modes is exclusively confined to one type of regime in Southeast Asia although, by definition, independent political space is confined in authoritarian regimes.

On the top right of the matrix are modes that involve ‘individualized political expression’, which are relatively autonomous from the state. In the formal political sphere this can involve direct meetings with a local member of parliament. In the extra-parliamentary sphere, these expressions can include writing a protest letter or some other politically oriented article for a newspaper, signing a petition, making a call to a talkback radio station, or choosing not to purchase goods originating from a particular country because of labour practices involved in the production of those goods. Especially important nowadays is the use of Internet media such as blogs or other online avenues for individual political expression. These are extensive across the region, although less prevalent and subject to periodic suppression and tight controls under authoritarian rule, such as in Vietnam, where authorities have imprisoned bloggers for alleged anti-state activities, and in Thailand during the struggle between so-called Red and Yellow Shirt forces when lèse-majesté was widely employed to silence political comments on the monarchy (see Pavin 2010; Steinglass 2009). It is possible, too, for these expressions to border on, or morph into, means for inspiring or coordinating the mobilization of civil society forces.

On the bottom right of the matrix in Table 2.1 we find modes that involve collective participation that are also relatively autonomous from the state, labelled here ‘civil society expression’. By definition, the extent of independent CSOs is limited under authoritarian regimes such as those of Singapore and Vietnam, but more extensive elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Characteristically, though, it is not
Table 2.1 Modes of political participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of inclusion</th>
<th>Sites of participation*</th>
<th>Sites of participation*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State and trans-state sponsored</td>
<td>Autonomous from the state</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Administrative incorporation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• REACH (Singapore)</td>
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<td>• Law on Complaints and Denunciations (Vietnam)</td>
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<td>• National Radio Kampuchea talkback programme (Cambodia)</td>
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<td>• Citizen Charter-related grievance and feedback mechanisms (Philippines)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>Societal incorporation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Bids &amp; Awards Committee, Local Development Councils under Local Government Code, National Anti-Poverty Commission (Philippines)</td>
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<td>• REACH, Nominated MPs (Singapore)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Kecamatan Development Program, Musrenbang (Indonesia)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Social Investment Fund (Thailand)</td>
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<td>• Committee for Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Adherents (Malaysia)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Individualized political expression</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Yawning Bread, The Online Citizen (Singapore)</td>
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<td>• Blogger for Freedom, Charles Hector (Malaysia)</td>
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<td>• Bangkok Pundit, Midnight University (Thailand)</td>
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<td>• PCIJ, Philippine Democracy Online (Philippines)</td>
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Note

These are only select examples to illustrate the four modes of participation.

so much class-based organizations as other CSOs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) that have in recent decades been the most significant vehicles for social activists in the region. These organizations have sought to promote protection for civil and individual rights and collective goods through a range of causes, including human rights, the environment, media freedom and rural livelihoods. Generally, though, these organizations have not pursued agendas to fundamentally transform the established political order, as was often characteristic of earlier class-based organizations engaged in social activism in Southeast Asia (see Hewison and Rodan 1996).

The other two modes refer to differing ways in which individuals and groups participate in forms of state-controlled or state-sponsored political participation, sometimes through relationships with trans-state structures involving international
and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank. On the bottom left of the matrix is 'societal incorporation' providing for collective representation of societal actors within the state. This not only includes some established forms of state corporatist institutions but also more recent forms of CSO and NGO participation. For example, a wide range of social groups has been incorporated into the process of scrutinizing the awarding of government procurement contracts in the Philippines. These modes favour state-targeted and often administratively defined communities. Through nominated appointments to Singapore's parliament, for example, notional representatives of youth, labour, small business and various other social categories are brought into public policy consultation on quite specific matters of state-defined policy importance. Public policy engagement is not, however, meant to extend to politically competing with the ruling party (Rodan 2009). Crucially, under societal incorporation, which groups are deemed appropriate to represent the communities that policymakers seek to involve in consultation is not guided by democratic principles; nor are the represented meant to have the power to hold decision-makers to account. Instead, which groups are included or excluded is guided by a technocratic conception of politics as problem solving rather than a struggle over power is structured. It is the potential utility of groups to help in addressing state-defined problems that matters, resulting in a systematic bias against avenues for representing groups with an interest in addressing conflict rooted in social class.

The top left of the matrix involves individual incorporation within the state labelled 'administrative incorporation'. Here, individuals are granted access to administrative institutions and public policy processes as a way of managing or attempting to resolve political conflict and of circumventing collective responses. This includes mechanisms for feedback and consultation on specific government policy or policy proposals and grievance and complaints mechanisms over how laws and regulations have been applied. Yet the political relationship between individuals and specific state departments and agencies is not one of democratic accountability that acknowledges or promotes the political rights of citizens to discipline elites. Instead, the framing of intrinsically political conflicts in administrative and technical terms depoliticizes the way these conflicts are understood and managed. Substantive debate and contestation over the purpose of public policies or laws is blocked or subordinated to the effective implementation or refinement of them.

In practice, the boundaries between these modes of political participation are sometimes blurred. The same actors may at different times operate in autonomous civil society sites and then in state-controlled sites, for example. Thus, conservationists and environmentalists in Singapore have worked through the independent Nature Society of Singapore as well as taken up appointments as Nominated Members of Parliament. Nevertheless, the framework helps focus analysis on the consequences for social activism of operating through different modes of political participation and invites explanation as to why some CSOs and NGOs are more inclined than others to operate through particular modes. It draws attention to both the complex layering of social activism and the need for analysis of the underlying social foundations associated with the opportunities and constraints of that activism.
Individual activism and the Internet

Within Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, the advent of new electronic and digital media technologies has significantly expanded the avenues for individualized political expression, even under authoritarian regimes. The extent, nature and impact of such expressions are nevertheless mediated by significant variations in state–society relationships and related scope for independent political space. Where vibrant CSOs exist, the options for activism can open up so that more collective forms of political participation through new media can join these individual modes of participation. In more authoritarian contexts, it is when individual modes of expression are articulated with more collective modes of participation that political elites and authorities feel most threatened and respond accordingly.

In post-authoritarian Indonesia and the Philippines blogging sites have mushroomed. One conspicuous theme to this has been their use by professional or citizen journalists (Montemayor and Azagra 2009), most of whom do not act in concert with political parties, NGOs or CSOs. Indonesia’s Wimar Witoelar is among the more prominent such examples. Wimar was a popular television host of the talk show *Perspektif* before it was banned under Suharto, then a spokesperson for former President Abdurrahman Wahid. He subsequently created his own YouTube show, tvTWO, and is regularly interviewed on mainstream media programmes. His political views thus get a wide airing and exert an influence over public debate, but they are not usually intended to support or activate organized collective political action by others. There is also a vast array of other political blogs by lesser-known individuals seeking to inject their views into public discussion and debate. Occasionally, such individual political expressions provide the catalyst for large-scale coordinated social activism. When Indonesian housewife Prita Mulyasari was sued and imprisoned after a private email to 20 friends complaining about poor treatment at Omni International Hospital was forwarded to various mailing lists and forums, she inspired a Facebook support group that attracted more than 100,000 members and several blog sites supporting her cause (Agence France-Presse 2011).

Some forms of individual expression are incorporated within the causes and strategic purposes of independent collective political action. Two of Malaysia’s best-known bloggers, Raja Petra Kamarudin and Charles Hector, provide clear examples of this. Here the boundaries of individual expression and social activism start to blur. Raja was a leading member of Keadilan – the reform party initially led by Anwar Ibrahim’s wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, and subsequently Anwar himself – and headed the Free Anwar Campaign following the former Deputy Prime Minister’s detention under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and subsequent prosecution and imprisonment in 1999. Raja’s *Malaysia Today* website, which gets somewhere between 500,000 and 1,000,000 hits daily, has a reputation for regularly exposing high-level power abuses by the Malaysia government and its authorities (Bland 2010). Apart from sometimes endorsing collective protest (Raja 2011), Raja’s blog site affords ample space to a range of other
reform-minded writers linked to CSOs. Hector has been involved in the human rights NGO, SUARAM, Malaysians against Death Penalty & Torture (MADPET) and the National Human Rights Society (HAKAM), among other activist organizations. In addition to his dedicated blog site, he contributes to another eight separate blogs of CSOs and political parties. His postings are thus also part of a broader set of collective political activities and objectives. It is in significant part due to links with CSOs and political parties that both Raja and Hector have been subjected to serious pressure from public authorities and powerful interests. This includes detention under the ISA for the former and a defamation suit brought against the latter for publishing information via his blog and twitter about alleged labour rights violations (Bland 2010; Loh 2011).

For bloggers in Thailand and Vietnam, authorities’ perceptions of the potential for individual expressions to ignite or support social activism make their attempts to exploit the Internet for political participation problematic. Thai authorities’ perceptions of individual expressions through the Internet have been shaped by a protracted struggle for power since 2005 between Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts (see Brown and Ayudhya, this volume). Fear of mass mobilizations by Red Shirts has heightened the political sensitivity of the Internet. By mid-2010, at least 113,000 websites had been blocked, deemed by Thai authorities to have posed a threat to national security, which in most cases involved material that was allegedly ‘contemptuous of the country’s royal family’ (Luft 2008; see also Pavin 2010). In Vietnam, where CSOs are all but non-existent, the political use of the Internet by individuals assumes even greater significance. Duy Hoang (2010), spokesperson for the outlawed and US-based Viet Tan (Vietnam Reform Party) optimistically asserted that: ‘We see the blogosphere in Vietnam as a de facto free media; social networks as the new town square where people can freely assemble; and digital activism as a cutting edge means of nonviolent struggle.’ However, owing to extensive state surveillance, intimidation, harassment and arrests, this ideal is far from realized. One significant initiative has been the Nà Kìa club website through which individuals are invited to upload photographs of the lavish homes of government and communist party officials. Another was an online petition against bauxite mining in the ecologically sensitive Central Highlands, which attracted thousands of signatures and received nearly 20 million views. However, several bloggers were subsequently arrested for postings critical of bauxite mining, including Pham Minh Hoang, who was sentenced in 2011 to ten years in jail (Committee to Protect Journalists 2011).

Challenging authoritarianism

While the historical juncture of capitalist development in Southeast Asia and the Cold War legacy have militated against powerful and independent working class-based organizations, activists have sought to carve out relatively autonomous political space for collective activism via other organizations. Importantly, some of this activism has surfaced in authoritarian regimes, seeking to challenge the regime’s institutions or values. Malaysia is such a case, where the last decade and

a half has witnessed mass mobilization but also some institutional change. An example of this is the Fair Feel movement, a broad coalition of diverse social movements and political groups who have sought to secure a referendum on the multimillion dollar’s worth of commercial development plans for the city of Penang. 

The return of the pro-democracy protestors to the streets of Kuala Lumpur in November 2007 coincided with the withdrawal of the nationalist coalition, Barisan Nasional, from the government and for the first time in a decade. The elections were won by the opposition’s historic victory, managing to garner 28% of the vote. The leaders of the opposition, Anwar Ibrahim and Karpal Singh. The result was hailed as a victory for democracy and civil society. The election was seen as a significant step towards the realization of a democratic future in Malaysia. However, the victory was not without controversy, as some opposition leaders were disqualified from running in the elections, leading to accusations of electoral fraud.

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The limits to independent political space  29

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Asia and the at working classes, especially autonomous importantly, some to challenge the last decade and

a half has witnessed not just growth in the number and range of NGOs and CSOs, but also some significant episodes of social movement activism (Weiss 2006).

An example of Malaysian social movement activism is the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil, Bersih). Its sustained mass mobilization strategies do not just encompass cross-ethnic alliances and diverse social forces, but also increasingly combine with embryonic party political links to advance electoral reform objectives. The genesis of Bersih can be traced to the 2004 general election in Malaysia, which led to widespread accusations of voting irregularities. In July 2005, the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform was established, officially launched as Bersih in November 2006 by a broad coalition of 25 CSOs and five opposition parties. In September 2007, a rally was held in Batu Buruk, Trengganu, in protest against the Electoral Commission's response to Bersih's complaints about phantom voters, vote buying, questionable recounts and physical intimidation at polling booths, despite authorities refusing a rally permit. Riot police intervened to forcefully break it up (Lee 2008: 27–8). Then, when rumours of a late 2007 general election subsequently gathered momentum, an estimated 40,000–60,000 people assembled in central Kuala Lumpur in November 2007 to demand electoral reform – again, in defiance of authorities. Riot police this time deployed tear gas and water cannons, with 46 protesters arrested during or after the rally (Lee 2008: 198). Although the ruling coalition, Barisan Nasional, was returned to government in 2008, it did so against the background of a major voter backlash. It received just over half the votes cast and for the first time lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority needed for constitutional reforms. It also lost government in five states. Among the new state and federal Members of Parliament were several prominent human rights social activists from CSOs and NGOs that supported Bersih, which by this time had grown to 60 and included religious, ethnic, consumer, student, labour, women's and good governance organizations (see Weiss 2009: 755).

The return of the Barisan Nasional did not mean the end of Bersih's campaign. Further controversy over electoral procedures, this time regarding the April 2011 Sarawak state election, precipitated a Bersih 2.0 March for Democracy scheduled for 9 July that year. The lead-up to the 9 July rally underscored the growing anxiety of the government over the demonstrated capacity of Bersih not only to draw support from diverse groups, but also to mobilise this outside government-controlled institutions. Seeking a compromise, the government initially endorsed the holding of the rally in Kuala Lumpur's Merdeka Stadium. However, it subsequently reneged on this, arresting 270 supporters for wearing or selling Bersih's distinctive yellow T-shirts, printing or possessing Bersih posters, or promoting Bersih objectives at public meetings and declaring Bersih an illegal organization on 1 July. Roads were subsequently blocked and train stations closed to limit access to inner city Kuala Lumpur and civil servants were also warned not to participate in any rallies. Nevertheless, around 10,000 protesters took to the streets, confronted with water cannon, tear gas and other intimidation.

Acknowledging that repression would not be sufficient to stymie this social movement, Prime Minister Najib subsequently announced a nine-member
Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate and take public recommendations on electoral reform. However, this initiative had all the hallmarks of an attempt to politically manage and tactically divert the efforts of this movement. First, five of the nine on the committee were members of Barisan Nasional. Second, Najib gave no undertaking that its recommendations would be implemented before the next polls. Third, the committee’s interim report on 1 December 2011 incorporated just one of Bersih’s eight demands – the use of indelible ink. Fourth, Najib seemed to operate from the premise that the problem was one of changing perceptions rather than practices, describing the proposal to establish the committee as ‘a smart move to dispel accusations by irresponsible parties that the present practice of election is not democratic, fair and transparent’ (quoted in Pathmawathy 2011).

Meanwhile, in November 2011, the government tabled the Peaceful Assembly Bill that bans street protests (Hazlani 2011), despite Najib also pledging the future repeal of repressive laws restricting civil liberties (Teoh 2011).

Irrespective of the sincerity or not behind the establishment of the Parliamentary Select Committee, its creation demonstrates that the collective independent political activities of Bersih put the ruling coalition on the defensive about the very institution through which it formally secures power. However, the strength of this movement was also part of its weakness. The heterogeneous interests and ideologies united in the desire to see electoral institutions conducted cleanly and fairly also lacked strong class-based organizations capable of extending collective protest action into strategically important sectors of the economy. Indeed, such a course of action, even if it were possible, would likely unravel this complex coalition largely led by middle-class professionals. Yet class-based political mobilization was pivotal to the earlier democratization in Western Europe and elsewhere.

Refining authoritarian rule

The most concerted attempts within an authoritarian regime to refine political co-option through administrative and societal incorporation have taken place in Singapore. Decades of repression have severely curtailed genuinely independent CSOs in the city-state. The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) seeks to keep it that way as capitalist development generates new social forces and conflicts. The rationale for Singapore’s new modes of political participation was explained by Goh Chok Tong (1986: 7), Prime Minister between 1989 and 2004, thus: ‘What a plural society like ours needs is a tradition of government which emphasizes consensus instead of division, that includes rather than excludes, and that tries to maximize the participation of the population in the national effort, instead of minimizing it.’ As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (1999) has underlined, this is considered instrumental for elite rule: ‘In a rapidly changing environment, much of the valuable up-to-date information is held by people at the frontline. Policy makers must draw on this knowledge to understand realities on the ground, and reach better solutions.’

The first major such initiative was the Feedback Unit, established in 1985 and renamed Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home (REACH) in 2006,
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ACH) in 2006,
which entails both administrative and societal incorporation. REACH’s direction is
broadly set by a Supervisory Panel, whose head, a PAP Member of Parliament
(MP), is appointed by the government, as are many others on the Panel. The omis-
sion of opposition politicians and independent civil society activists is precisely
because the idea is to foster political ‘consensus’, not competition. REACH’s exhaus-
tive mechanisms of consultation atomize and/or compartmentalize constituencies,
militating against the formation of political coalitions, beyond specific sectoral or
policy issues. One way this is done is through individualized participation, another is
by constructing the social categories to be represented in consultative processes or
by working closely with preferred existing groups.

Administrative incorporation of individuals through online consultation chan-
nels accounts for the vast bulk of this feedback. This includes: e-Polls targeting
specific respondents based on demographic characteristics deemed of interest to
REACH and driven by issues or questions of interest to government ministries or
agencies; e-consultation papers published by government departments and agen-
ties and seeking either targeted or open expressions of views on existing or
proposed government policies through SMS and email; e-Townhall webchats to
engage citizens following major government policy announcements; the Discus-
ion Corner, which takes place on the REACH website and often requests people’s
responses to certain facts, arguments or issues that REACH defines as a problem;
and the General Feedback channel, where citizens are linked to relevant govern-
ment departments that subsequently reply directly to the participant, with
complaints or suggestions treated by authorities as technical or service quality
issues to be dealt with privately.

REACH’s societal incorporation includes in-person engagement through
Dialogue Sessions, which are generally small and informal, involving pre-policy
and post-policy consultations chaired by two Supervisory Panel members. In prin-
ciple open to the general public, in practice this is largely through invitations to
‘strategic partners’ with a record of working cooperatively with the ruling party
(Feedback Unit 2004: 35–7). There are also Policy Study Workgroups, chaired by
people from the private or social sector, appointed by the Supervisory Panel, that
undertake studies and submit policy proposals to government at annual confer-
ences. A separate category of meetings that is less policy-driven is the Tea
Sessions, chaired by a PAP MP and one other Supervisory Panel member. They
are broken up into one or other of 14 discrete groups of Singaporeans, including
students, youth, women, professionals, ethnic communities, ‘heartlanders’, small
and medium enterprises, and multinational corporations. Observations from
participants themselves suggest that this compartmentalization of issues condi-
tions discussions in the Dialogue and Tea Sessions (Feedback Unit 2005: 10).

Clearly, participation through REACH is steered towards the limited exercise
of helping to improve or implement PAP government policy. While it is possible
to point to some positive outcomes (see Rodan and Jayasuriya 2007: 802–5),
the processes through which groups and individuals are consulted militates against
the formation of political coalitions around, and indeed beyond, specific sectoral
or policy issues. Providing avenues for feedback with separate ethnic groups on
community development issues, for example, is not conducive to the formation of broad anti-poverty or social justice coalitions.

Authoritarian elites in Vietnam too have attempted to pre-empt the emergence of independent CSOs capable of providing collective representation, especially for citizens adversely affected by the momentous transformations and inequalities generated by the shift to a market economy. For the Vietnamese Communist Party, administrative incorporation has been an integral component of the political management of new social forces and conflict emanating from the transition from a command to a market economy. As well as friction over the social impacts of these policies, a host of disputes has surfaced among competing elite interests within the state and between new private commercial interests and the state. In this context, new mechanisms have been established by which citizens can voice grievances against the actions of particular administrative agencies. While this involves scrutiny of administrative decision-making, the process obstructs collective action and suppresses rather than institutionalizes genuine political accountability (Rodan and Jayasuriya 2007: 807).

A major mechanism through which this mode of political participation has been opened up is via the Law on Complaints and Denunciations, introduced in 1998 but amended several times thereafter. Complaints are meant to focus on the process of policy implementation – for example, possible wrongful decisions and corrupt administrative action by authorities – rather than the substantive ends of policy. In practice, though, the conflicts addressed through the Law on Complaints and Denunciations mostly relate to systemic problems associated with government policy and the transition to a market economy. Among the hundreds of thousands of complaints received each year, around 80 per cent concern land management issues. Other complaints include concern over the implementation of policies on the environment and social policies (VietNews 2010, Asia Foundation 2009: 3).

The Law on Complaints and Denunciations does not permit collective responses. Despite recent provisions enabling lawyers to offer limited advice and support in the claimant settlement process (Asia Foundation 2009: 10), citizens must act as individuals in constructing and submitting their administrative petitions and letters of complaint. Specialized ‘inspectores’ investigate complaints, the official resolution of which ultimately rests with heads of state administrative organs. These limitations have not gone unchallenged. In September 2010, activist lawyer Cu Huy Ha Vu filed a legal suit against the Vietnamese Prime Minister for signing Decision No. 136 forbidding citizens from filing class action petitions and complaints with the government. Vu contended that the decree is in violation of the Constitution, which stipulates that ‘citizens have the right to gather, form groups and protest in conformity with the law’ (quoted in Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2010). However, not only was the suit thrown out when the court asserted that it did not have the authority to try the Prime Minister, but Vu was subsequently charged with ‘conducting anti-propaganda against the state’ and sentenced to seven years in prison (Associated Press 2011).

For Vietnamese authorities, preserving the atomization of the complaints process is important to concealing the intrinsically political nature of what are currently portrayed as purely administrative and uncontroled political economic and social developments. Authoritarianism is likely to continue to be associated with a particular political regime.

Partnerships in the Philippines

Innovations in the Philippines, or in the region more generally, are not limited to political movements. The longest-standing of the largest electoral and social movements are involved in a process of institutionalization of civil society watchdog institutions – that is, the existing formal and informal networks of social actors who monitor and challenge the performance of commissions, institutions, and officials.

In the Philippines (PRA) in 2002, after the reforming societals act (RRSA) awarding public status to the PRA was the result of a sector, academia, and civil society concern about the Estrada Administration’s coalition of state (Estrada 2006: 11). By February 2002, the reorganization of sector and civil society accountability was being transformed, funded by a private sector, and mostly from the PRA becoming an instrument for...
currently portrayed as purely administrative issues. The mobilization of collective interests and identities, even by legal means as advocated by Vu, is precisely what administrative incorporation is meant to pre-empt. In the absence of other less-controlled political spaces and given the extent of friction generated by Vietnam’s economic and social transformation, growing recourse to the complaints mechanism is likely to continue. Consequently, the potential for conflict and disaffection associated with market development to translate into effective challenges to the political regime may also be substantially contained.

Partnerships in governance reform

Innovations in the incorporation of social activists into state-controlled institutions, or in the attempt to pre-empt the emergence of social activism in the first place, are not limited to authoritarian regimes. On the contrary, these are evident in the Philippines — the first country in the region where authoritarian rule was overthrown and where CSOs and NGOs are most extensive — and in Indonesia, the largest electoral democracy in Southeast Asia. Alongside various individual and collective independent political expressions, in both countries CSOs and NGOs are involved in a range of ‘partnerships’ with governments and/or multilateral and international aid agencies to promote good governance. Indeed, an increasingly significant dimension of civil society activism in both countries entails initiatives in social accountability mechanisms supported by foreign aid donors as part of governance reform and capacity building programmes. These mechanisms include monitoring and auditing functions — such as citizen report cards, social audits and society watchdogs on corruption, transparency, labour standards and electoral institutions — that may generate media attention and political pressure to activate existing formal accountability institutions. They also include direct incorporation of social actors onto state-based or government-initiated bodies, such as truth commissions, citizens’ advisory boards and public procurement bodies.

In the Philippines, the passing of the Government Procurement Reform Act (GIRA) in 2002 institutionalized national civil society–state partnerships, incorporating societal actors onto Bids and Awards Committees (BACs) responsible for awarding public sector contracts. The key coalition associated with the passing of the GIRA was the Transparency and Accountability Network (TAN), formed in November 2000. Comprising 19 NGOs, TAN included elements of the private sector, academia and assorted social and religious organizations that shared concern about the lack of transparency and the prevalence of corruption within the Estrada Administration. The initial driving force to enact the GIRA comprised a coalition of state bureaucrats and international aid agencies (Campos and Syquia 2006: 11). By February 2001, though, it was concluded that links with civil society were needed to knit together the expertise and organizational ingredients for social accountability. Hence, the NGO Procurement Watch Inc. (PWI) was formed, funded by a grant from the World Bank (Campos and Syquia 2006: 16–7). What ensued was a sustained and well-coordinated political campaign resulting in the GIRA becoming law in January 2003 (Campos and Syquia 2006: 25–30). This
was the democratic highpoint of the movement: the assertion of civil society authority as the imperative for change.4

The BACs' roles include determining the eligibility of prospective bidders, evaluating bids and recommending the award of contracts for national and local government departments, agencies, bureaus and offices. Comprising between five and seven members, the BAC is required to have at least two observers sitting in on proceedings: 'one from a duly recognized private group in a sector or discipline relevant to the procurement at hand, and the other from a non-government organization' (Republic of the Philippines 2003: 9). The technical expertise and organizational capacities of CSOs are integral to the training and recruitment of observers on the BACs and the monitoring of compliance with the Act. Accordingly, PWI's task has been both enhanced and narrowed, as it plays a pivotal role in training other NGOs, state officials and individual volunteers. PWI estimates that, of the 8,000 trained observers needed, only about 800 existed by the end of 2009 (IBP 2009). The PWI's role has thus changed from a confrontational, overtly political and explicitly democratic one in the campaign to get the Act passed, to a mainly technical role. Concern has also emerged about co-option. This was particularly evident in the reaction of civil society groups to President Arroyo's creation of a Procurement Transparency Group (PTG) in late 2007, headed by the Government Procurement Policy Board and involving five government agencies and five NGOs. With a brief to evaluate and monitor procurement activities, the establishment of PTG aroused suspicion among activists who saw it as duplicating the roles of the Ombudsman and existing BACs. Nevertheless, civil society groups continue to support the PRA and, to be sure, the roles of BAC observers and recourse to the PTG have produced some significant instances of arresting corruption – including suspected irregularities in the awarding of large-scale projects by the National Irrigation Administration (Go 2009).

While the PRA has opened up avenues for increasing accountability, practical demands consume a disproportionate civil society effort in technical rather than political exercises. An even more pervasive aspect of this is the ideological framing of corruption as the principal political and moral problem confronting the Philippines to be rectified through better-designed governance institutions. Those institutions are intended, above all else, to ensure the forces of market competition are not blunted but maximized to curb corruption. With the problem of, and solution to, corruption defined in this way, alternative reform priorities are either subordinated or marginalized. In particular, conceptions of corruption as symptomatic of structurally rooted social conflicts and consideration of the implications of this for mechanisms of political accountability and representation do not resonate with the non-adversarial state–civil society partnership model embraced by much of the Philippine middle class.

Although social accountability is not as extensive in Indonesia, governance reform agendas involve a wide range of trans-state and state-controlled institutions and programmes incorporating CSOs and NGOs. One example of societal incorporation in democratic Indonesia is the Development Planning Consultations (Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan, Musrenbang) developed after the
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...of civil society... perspective bidders, national and local... between five... observers sitting in a sector or discipline... non-governmental expertise and recruitment of the Act. Accordantly... a pivotal role... PWI estimation... by the end of the first... Act passed, to a... This was partic-... Arroyo’s creation... the Government agencies and five... as duplicating the civil society groups... AC observers and... arresting corruption... scale projects... instability, practical... illogical rather than... is the ideological... in confronting the institutions. Those... market competition... problem of, and solu-... orities are either... as symptoms of... implications of the phenomenon of... do not resolve... embraced by... mesia, governance... -controlled institu-... example of societal... Consultations... developed after the... introduction of decentralization through Law No. 22/1999 concerning Regional Governance, under which local governments were given new authority to manage a wide range of state functions, including local planning and budget affairs. Political representation of the informal sector, and particularly the urban poor that dominate employment within it, is fundamental to effective solutions to contentious local government planning issues. This is especially so given that members of this sector are also least represented through political parties. The Musrenbang are intended to provide opportunities for non-government actors to participate in proposing, identifying and determining local development policy priorities (USAID 2007; Wilson, Djani and Masduki 2009: 2–3). However, far from empowering CSOs, NGOs and local citizens, these ‘stakeholder’ forums most often just add a veneer of political legitimacy to decisions tightly controlled by local elites and vested interests.

Syamsuddin et al. (2007: 9) have argued that ‘elite capture’ is a challenge ‘to community collective action and the accommodation of community aspirations’ through Musrenbang. A study by Wilson, Djani, and Masduki (2009) into Musrenbang in three quite different districts in Bali, Southeast Sulawesi and West Java also revealed a pattern of excluding participation by organizations critical of government and little or no representation of the urban poor, including street vendors, small traders and retailers. Wilson (2010) has found that the urban poor have generally also been excluded from deliberative and consultative processes in Jakarta, where estimates of street traders alone in Jakarta are as high as 350,000. The interests of these workers often conflict with those of the most wealthy and most powerful people also seeking to influence local government planning decisions. And through control over the composition of the Musrenbang, authorities are able to keep the expressions of conflict within limits partly by excluding organizations critical of government and partly by incorporating supporter groups of local politicians or political parties (see Wilson et al. 2009: 9).

Conclusion

This chapter has drawn attention to the variety of ways that political engagement occurs within Southeast Asia and the significance of this for social activism. It matters which mode of participation activism is channelled through: some permit greater potential to set reform agendas than others, some limit participation to helping those in power refine their own policies, and others offer opportunities to contest the purpose of public policy. Equally, the interests and ideologies of activists are varied, resulting in differences among social activists in the attraction to one or other mode of political participation. The relative importance and attraction of different avenues for social activism cannot be understood, either, without appreciating their structural and historical context. Dramatic economic and social transformations throughout most of Southeast Asia in the last three decades have generated new conflicts and social forces. These have elicited a variety of regime responses and accommodations, including the creation of new democratic and non-democratic political spaces. Neither the legacy of the Cold War nor advanced...
economic globalization has been favourable to class-based forms of collective organization, especially trade unions. State-led development and various forms of 'crony capitalism' have also limited the social base for genuinely independent middle classes in much of the region. These are not the social foundations for strong and independent civil societies, let alone cohesive social democratic reform movements.

Consequently, social forces seeking to advance democratic reform agendas have had to pursue different alliances and strategies from those that proved effective in earlier democratizations in Western Europe and elsewhere. As this volume testifies, there is much creative effort along these lines throughout the region. However, democratic agendas can be subsumed by liberal and moral reform campaigns that emphasize values of efficiency or integrity of rulers and/or institutions but do not necessarily champion greater political authority of the masses. Social movements seeking to arrest corruption are a prime example. Indeed, state- and trans-state-sponsored political spaces promoting notions of 'empowerment' and 'good governance' often find a resonance with liberal activists aspiring to non-democratic goals or are grasped by other activists for lack of alternative organizational avenues. In essence, then, the different modes of political participation illustrated in this chapter give expression to more than just varying mechanisms through which activism can be directed or stymied. These are, in effect, sites of ideological struggle over competing ideas of political representation. Such ideas extend beyond the democratic claim that the represented must have the capacity and authority to discipline those supposedly acting on their behalf.

Notes
1 Research for this essay was supported by Australian Research Council funding for a Discovery Project (1093214), 'Representation and Political Regimes in Southeast Asia'.
2 In an attempt to appease demonstrators, the Electoral Commission agreed to one of Bersih's substantive demands: the use of indelible ink to distinguish those who had voted. However, on the eve of the general election that transpired in March 2008, the EC reneged on this undertaking (Weiss 2009: 752).
3 All told, more than 1,600 arrests were made (Economist 2011).
4 Another alliance of NGOs, the Coalition against Corruption (CAC), was formed in 2004 to monitor compliance with the Act.

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Associated Press (2011) 'Vietnam activist’s lawyers file complaint after judge refused to cite evidence', April 6. Available at: http://blog.vietnam-aujourdhui.info/
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