First published 1996
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001
Routledge is an International Thomson Publishing Company
© 1996 Garry Rodan, selection and editorial matter; the
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Typeset in Times by
Ponting-Green Publishing Services, Chesham, Bucks
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham p.c., Chatham, Kent
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the publishers.
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.
Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Rodan, Garry, 1955–
Political oppositions in industrialising Asia / Garry Rodan.
p. cm. — (New rich in Asia).
1. Opposition (Political science)—Asia. 2. Political
participation—Asia. 3. Industrialization—Political
aspects—Asia. 4. Asia—Politics and government—1945–
1. Title. II. Series.
JQ36.R63 1996
324.995—dc20
96-3329
CIP
ISBN 0-415-14865-0 (pbk)

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Kevin Hewison and Garry Rodan*

INTRODUCTION

As has been mentioned in Chapter 1, the literature on contemporary political change in East and Southeast Asia pays particular attention to the relationship between economic development and civil society. This preoccupation is not peculiar to modernisation theorists, but is found among writers from a range of theoretical positions, including Marxist authors. A striking tendency across this theoretical spectrum is a view of civil society as a progressive outcome of capitalist development. The implication in this literature is that contemporary attempts to expand the political space of civil society are either more significant or more substantive than previous attempts. Indeed, previous attempts are rarely acknowledged at all.

A significant part of the explanation for this tendency lies in the adoption of definitions of political or regime change and democracy which direct attention only to the most recent round of jockeying between the state and civil society. There is a strong association of civil society with liberal democratic political forms such as parliaments, constitutions, and legal political parties. Much is made of the functional relationship between an extensive civil society and these forms. Such perspectives downplay or ignore struggles involved in the emergence of civil society, many of which have taken place outside the confines of parliaments, constitutions, and legal political parties. The contributions of these extra-parliamentary political movements to the deepening and expansion of civil society in earlier periods have generally been overlooked in the emerging literature on democratisation and regime change.

The primary theoretical point of this chapter is to challenge the idea that any contemporary expansions in the political space that is civil society lead towards some historical end point. Instead, we view these expansions as a part of the ebb and flow of political opposition, broadly conceived, which is ongoing and certainly unprecedented. This is not to suggest, however, that this ebb and flow simply involves a repetition of history, for in each phase of civil society’s expansion there are new dimensions. Furthermore, while the emergence of civil society is significant to the development of democracy, the political space can and has expanded even under unrepresentative regimes. These points will be demonstrated by way of a historical account of the political struggles in Southeast Asia that have periodically opened up civil society, usually followed by temporary closure due to the repressive actions of colonial and post-colonial governments. This historical account will focus specifically on the role of the ‘Left’ in these periodic political openings.

Before proceeding any further, let us first clarify what we mean when we refer to civil society. Civil society is an autonomous sphere ‘from which political forces representing constellations of interests in society have contested state power’ (Bernhard 1993: 307). The range of organisations in society may be enormous, but not all engage in overtly political activity. For example, seemingly apolitical groups can include sporting clubs as well as charitable and welfare-oriented associations—these might be considered as civic organisations. Politically active groups include a range of non-state groups which may or may not be legal: political parties, trade unions, employer and professional associations, women’s groups, student organisations, peasant and ethnic associations, an increasingly expansive group of politically activist non-government organisations (NGOs), and a range of social movements. These groups are regularly involved in political actions which attempt to advance the interests of people, ranging from those of their members to the more general interest of wider groups in society.

The autonomy of such organisations is fundamental, even if the class interests of these groups vary widely or even support the established regime or the hegemony of the dominant classes. Only through autonomous organisations can these non-state groups have an institutionalised influence over the official political sphere.

This need for autonomy often involves the state through legal recognition, but the state may also sanction this autonomy through its inaction, by not enforcing legal restrictions on political activities. As a result of struggle, the state can be compelled to recognise a political space where autonomous self-organisation can occur outside the sphere of official politics (Bernhard 1993: 308–9). Thus, it is not the emergence of organisations that is the measure of an expanded civil society. Rather, state actors must effectively legitimate the rights of such bodies to engage in political activity and even to challenge the exercise of state power before civil society can be said to be established.
isations may exist in the most authoritarian polities, but they do not then have the right to be politically activist. Social pluralism does not always translate into political pluralism.

Importantly, the state must itself establish boundaries to define the autonomous space of civil society and protect it from its own interference. In essence, the state must define what is to be considered 'political' and 'legitimate'. However, in return for being granted protected political space, the organisations and associations occupying it are expected to exert a measure of self-discipline. Where this space is not legally protected, the option exists for the state swiftly to cancel de facto recognition of independent political space.

The focus here on the role of the Left in the historical struggles to establish political spaces in Southeast Asia is not intended to suggest that this represents the entirety of the forces involved. However, the Left has historically played a crucially important strategic role which suitably illustrates our theoretical point. Moreover, the changing fortunes of the Left over time reveal something of the distinctiveness of the contemporary push for civil society in Southeast Asia. Among other factors, successful capitalist industrialisation has fostered not just new domestic interests and sources of power, but greater social differentiation – both have undercut traditional Left strategies and appeal. The severing of the link between nationalism and socialism, and the effective harnessing of nationalist ideology to capitalist development in Southeast Asia, have also restricted the Left in the contemporary period.

The 'Left' is a term which is often used loosely to refer to a variety of reformist movements and ideas. However, we understand the common denominator of the 'Left' to be an emphasis on alternatives to the individualism of market relationships and a commitment to values which advance public and collective interests. At one extreme this involves revolutionary social movements, grounded in class analysis and carrying a vision of an alternative social system, such as socialism or Communism. It can, however, also involve reformism of a social democratic nature which may challenge the prerogatives of capital and the market within much tighter limits, and without any serious vision of an alternative social system. Both these variants of the Left can be differentiated from liberal reformism which may champion individual human rights, the rule of law and liberal democracy, for example, without embracing collective and challenges to the market. Liberal reformism, nevertheless, seriously challenges authoritarian rule. In the discussion to follow, unless otherwise specified, we use the term 'the Left' principally to refer to socialists and Communists who played a leading role in earlier struggles for civil society.

In Southeast Asia, Communist and socialist movements enjoyed their greatest influence during the anti-colonialist and nationalist struggles, and especially following the Second World War. The organisational strengths of these movements, embodying coalitions of workers, peasants, and nationalists, made them indispensable to political strategies for self-government. Indeed, as will be indicated below, the Left played a pivotal role in the development of civil society in these years. Self-identified socialists and Communists also earned the respect of many for the often courageous roles played in confronting colonial forces in this process. Even so, the influence of the Southeast Asian Left should be kept in perspective, since its ideological appeal was confined to strategic sites rather than broadly embraced by the masses.

For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on the modern countries of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and their previous incarnations as colonies, with Thailand (previously Siam) being the non-colonial exception. We will show that the Left has been significant in giving much momentum to the development of non-state political space (what we will term civil society) in these countries. We suggest that this was particularly the case in three periods – 1920s–1930s, 1940s–1950s, and the 1970s – when the Left played a pivotal role in expanding the arena of political activity. The defeat of non-state movements saw civil society greatly reduced or even expelled by authoritarian governments, which especially targeted socialists, Communists and the labour and peasant organisations through which many of them operated.

We will go on to suggest that in the contemporary period, the political space associated with civil society is, to varying extents, again being created in the societies of Southeast Asia. However, for reasons to be set out below, it is no longer socialists and Communists who are leading this movement. Rather, a range of liberals and social reformers are playing the leading roles in establishing civil society through various non-state groups. Nevertheless, while the revolutionary Left may be overshadowed by a range of other contending political forces, this does not necessarily mean social reformism is an entirely spent force in contemporary Southeast Asia. Instead, the inequities and contradictions of the market system continue to generate social problems that cannot be alleviated by liberal reformism. The capitalist system per se is no longer under the sort of challenge mounted by the Left in the past, but the particular form that capitalism takes in Southeast Asia remains a matter of contest. In this context, social reformers may still exert an
influence by linking with other reformers in the various campaigns to extend the space of civil society.

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Writing in 1947, Du Bois noted three 'European streams of thought' which she considered had had a marked impact on Southeast Asian societies. These were social humanism, nationalism, and Marxism. Social humanism was seen to involve education and trade unionism, and to provide legal protection as well as introducing the ideal of the dignity of the individual. Nationalism was seen as being crucial as a powerful force against colonialism (Du Bois 1962: 42–4). Marxism was clearly linked to the rise of nationalism and anti-colonialism, and appealed to internationally linked labour. It should be remembered that Lenin's contribution to the debate on imperialism was a powerful document for those opposing colonialism. Lenin had seen the potential for revolution in Asia, writing in 1913, for example, that in the Dutch East Indies there 'was no stopping the growth of the democratic movement' (cited in Gafurov and Kim 1978: 385). Du Bois (1962: 45) explains the attractiveness of Marxism: 'its apparent reconciliation of social humanism and nationalism in colonial areas...its appeal to...intellectuals and seamen; and...the practical efforts of Russia, which in the 1920's was still a revolutionary nation'.

As will be indicated below, there is considerable insight in these observations. While historians have noted the impact of nationalism, little has been made of the contribution of Marxism, and the manner in which the Left took a leading role in linking anti-colonialism, nationalism, and 'social humanism'. Du Bois was writing in one of the periods where civil society was expanding, and the Left was playing a central political role. This period was, however, just one of a number of such periods.

It is obviously not possible to provide a full account of the trials and tribulations of the relationships between civil society and the state in all the countries of Southeast Asia over a period of some seventy years. Rather, we will take three broad slices through the modern history of Southeast Asia when civil society did develop, indicate the crucial roles played by the Left, and show how governments were able to limit and close this political space. We begin with the 1920s and 1930s, not a period usually considered to have been a hotbed of leftist activity in Southeast Asia.

**The 1920s and 1930s**

In the century up to the 1920s, the colonial governments (including the modernising Thai state) of Southeast Asia had seen and defeated numerous uprisings, most of them in the countryside. These millenarian reactions to colonial rule were, in part, a response to economic and political change. By this time, the various governments had institutionalised centralised and bureaucratised administrations, marked out the geographic boundaries of colonies and nation-states, and had, by and large, established government-defined systems of law and order (see Ilo 1992: 197–248; Trocki 1992: 85). In addition, in this era of high colonialism in Southeast Asia, local economies had been reorientated to the demands of mercantilism, with trade in commodities dominating the economic relationship with the west. The focus of political activity perceptibly shifted to urban areas and civil society–state relations.

It is sometimes forgotten that the 1920s marked the beginning of a renaissance in Southeast Asia, with significant change in the ideological climate and considerable political and social ferment. This ferment represented, in part, a struggle for the expansion of the political space we call civil society. The governments of the period were unrepresentative, either an absolute monarchy as in Thailand, or colonial administrations. The ferment was a struggle to gain greater political representation and national independence (Pluvier 1974: 15–21, 72–91; Bastin and Benda 1977: 95–7).

It is noteworthy that, prior to the 1920s, non-state community (or civic) organisations were significant. Throughout Southeast Asia a large number of civic associations had emerged, especially in urban areas, to further the interests of local people and the large immigrant communities, particularly the Chinese, but also other immigrants like the Indians.

These groups were not always politically active, and were certainly not sanctioned to engage in oppositional politics: their activities were usually social, cultural, and apolitical. However, they were often utilised by the state in managing their community, acting as political comparators between the state and their constituents, who were usually non-citizens (see Skinner 1957). Nevertheless, there were times when these organisations became politicised and found themselves acting in opposition to the state. This often led to labour activism, which immediately pitted these organisations against the state. Where labour was involved, the state would quickly brand their activities as subversive, and the organisation risked being labelled as a 'secret society', which meant illegality.
In Singapore, while the British maintained social order through direct repression, their general neglect of the population’s welfare had the effect of encouraging voluntary and independent organisations to fill the vacuum. Privately funded vernacular-medium schools, usually operating as night schools, were among the most numerous and significant of such organisations in Singapore, prompting the colonial state to require registration of schools and teachers and to give the government the power to regulate school activities. Apart from education, the associations provided welfare, legal, and minor infrastructural services (Turnbull 1982: 134; Chua 1993: 9–10).

But some politically significant groups also emerged. These included debating clubs, literary and study groups, and, of the like, which were often the training ground for nationalists. Educated locals in such groups soon found themselves confronting many of the assumptions of colonial rule while organised as ‘native’ associations (Steinberg 1971: 251).

Much of this growth of civic organisations took place in the period between 1890 and 1920; and by this latter date, many of them were moving beyond welfare and becoming politicised. For example, in British Burma, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association became the General Council of Burmese Associations in 1920, and began agitation against the colonial government, including strikes and boycotts. In the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), a plethora of associations had become politicised, especially student groups and religious organisations. Many of the Muslim groups in the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya were influenced by the anti-colonial sentiment of Islamic reform movements in Egypt (Steinberg 1971: 275–6, 290–8, 326).

Chinese societies and guilds were in many cases transformed into separate employer and employee organisations as capitalism developed, and ethnic workers’ organisations often showed a degree of solidarity with these Chinese workers (see Stenson 1970: 34; Brown 1990). The creation of ‘security forces, secret police organisations and spy networks to suppress political movements and labour unions’. While unions were small and represented only a fraction of the population—most of the population were farmers—they were economically significant groups operating in strategic areas such as the ports, transport, and other activities central to trade. Unions were clearly non-state centres of political activism, especially when linked to socialist, Communist, and oppositional movements as they often were, seriously challenging state power.

The 1920s and 1930s saw significant labour organisation. For example, in Thailand, the earliest recorded labour activity dates from the 1880s; and by the 1920s, labour activism led to the establishment of a workers’ newspaper during a particularly vicious strike in 1923. The group behind the strike and the newspaper was to become a driving force organising both the industrial and wider political struggles of industrial workers against the absolute monarchy. This activism caused the state to confront the so-called ‘labour problem’ (Brown 1990: 30–73).

While the colonial and Thai states seemed prepared to be tolerant, indeed in some respects were relieved that there were a range of non-government associations promoting the collective interests of different social and ethnic groups, they appear to have felt most threatened when the developing Left joined these organisations. For example, private Chinese-language schools throughout the region were caught up in movements emanating from political conflict in China, especially after the 1911 Revolution, and became important recruiting grounds for leftist youth and student movements. A strong anti-imperialist and anti-colonial rhetoric began to emerge from these schools, and Communists were seen to control many of them. The Communist Youth League in Singapore was established in 1926, with a strong base in such schools. A similar pattern was seen in Thailand and Malaya, and the authorities closed Chinese schools and attempted to control curricula (see Turnbull 1982; Skinner 1958). But it was not just the Chinese groups which became a focus of left-wing activism. Indeed, from the early 1920s, socialist and Communist organisations had formed in Southeast Asia. For example, the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia [PKI]) was formed in 1920. Following this, and in concert with developments in Vietnam and China, Communist organisations were founded throughout the region, and many of the nascent trade unions came under Left influence (van der Kroef 1980: 4–7; Cribb 1985: 251).

Some of this early activity was clearly related to the establishment of the Third International (Comintern) in 1919 and developing Soviet foreign policy. The Comintern had seen significant debate, especially between M. N. Roy and Lenin, over the relationship between Communist parties and anti-colonialism, with the latter favouring alliances with nationalist movements, while the former preferred an emphasis on developing the Communist movement. While a compromise was achieved, it was clear that local conditions also played a significant part in the strategy adopted. For example, in the Dutch East Indies the 1920s saw the strengthening of anti-colonialism and a nationalist movement within which the PKI became a leading element, developing a revolu-
tionary strategy which placed emphasis on the anti-colonial struggle. The PKI suffered a serious setback in 1926-7 following an abortive uprising, but its influence was soon to be restored. In Thailand, where anti-colonialism was not an issue, the nascent Left was able to develop, from its origins in the Chinese community, as the absolutism of the monarchy was questioned. A major boost to the Left came with the Great Depression, when economic and social conditions deteriorated, paving the way for more concerted action. In Singapore, the Comintern-inspired South Seas General Labour Union, which was established in 1926, had been unable to make any headway. By 1930, however, organised labour and the Left advanced. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was established in 1930, with Singapore as its base. The economic downturn in the rubber plantations and tin mines gave considerable impetus to the MCP and its associated unions. A concerted campaign to mobilise labour, which included the formation of the Malayan General Labour Union in 1934, saw the unions become a strong base for Left activism (Starner 1965: 223; van der Kroef 1980: 13).

In the Philippines, the Depression saw the expansion of the opposition and independence movement and, in 1929, the founding of the Socialist Party, which had its own labour organisation. Supporting peasants, tenant farmers, and workers and taking a nationalist stand, the party ran in elections as the Popular Front, and increased its support between 1933 and 1937. The Communist Party (Partido Komunist ng Pilipinas (PKP)) was officially established in 1930 but banned a year later, and went underground. The socialists merged with the Communist Party in 1938 to establish an anti-fascist front (Kratowska and Baison 1992: 264-5; Richardson 1993: 386; see also McCoy and de Jesus 1982; Kerkvliet 1977: Chapters 1-2).

It is usually maintained that the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) did not establish itself until 1942, but reports from the 1930s indicate that a variety of Communist organisations existed, particularly within the Chinese and Vietnamese communities, but including some ethnic Thais. More importantly, however, following the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, one faction of the People's Party was accused of 'Bolshevist' tendencies, especially in its relations with labour and students and in its economic policies. The government banned Communism in 1933 (van der Kroef 1980: 22; Goleay et al. 1969: 287).

By the late 1930s, Communist and socialist movements had emerged throughout Southeast Asia, both linked and divided by ethnicity and all influenced by the nationalist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist move-
of economic planning, suggesting that benefits could be obtained from centralised planning. Nationalists argued that modernisation could only be achieved in the Southeast Asian countries through government investments and planning, thereby strengthening the position of the Left which had long argued for this kind of economic intervention.6 Economic nationalism became a solid stream of Left and nationalist programmes. In the words of one commentator:

Indigenism is also influenced by the extent to which the ideology of nationalism is socialist. Independence movements in Southeast Asia, to a substantial degree, were recruited from elements uncommitted by ownership of property or job security. Furthermore, because socialism is identified with social and economic reform in the industrial West, it appeals to nationalist elements whether evolutionary or revolutionary. This appeal is reinforced... by the Western socialist tradition of opposition to colonialism.

(Golay et al. 1969: 453)

This was clear in Burma and Indonesia, and in a more limited way in Thailand, Malaya, and the Philippines. In Indonesia, for example, most of the political parties were strongly nationalist and anti-colonialist, and this was reflected in an anti-foreign capital stance. The PKI was opposed to foreign investment, but it tended to be supportive of the role of national capital, while the PSI (Indonesian Socialist Party) opposed extreme nationalism (Golay et al. 1969: 119–24). Many Communists were also greatly heartened by the progress made by the Communist parties in Indochina and China.

By 1950, both nationalists and the Left in Southeast Asia must have felt that the tide of history was changing. The Philippines and Indonesia had gained their independence, albeit by very different routes; Thailand had remained independent; the Chinese Communists were in power; the situation in Indochina was in the balance; Communists had launched armed struggles in Malaya and Singapore, the Philippines (the Hukbalahap rebellion), Indonesia (the Mudjan affair), and Burma (van der Kroef 1980: 25–32; Pluvier 1974: Part VI).

The history of the Left in Southeast Asia often ignores the contribution made by the legal socialist movement. This ignorance stems from the fact that, by the early 1950s, most socialists had taken an anti-Communist stance, even though they were at the forefront of the Asian socialist movement. Many assumed an unusual position, supporting the Chinese Revolution while opposing Communists in Southeast Asia. This group adopted what the then Burmese Prime Minister U Ba Swe called ‘revolutionary democratic Socialist methods to improve the...
standard of living of the masses . . . ' (as quoted in the Foreword in Joseny 1957). For Joseny, 'Asian socialism' was about easing the underdevelopment of the region and the poverty of millions through some form of collectivism. It was interested in social welfare, and socialists 'were nationalists first', opposing colonialism and imperialism by 'democratic, egalitarian and fraternal' methods. Significantly, Asian socialism was opposed to capitalism because of its links with colonialism, but opposed to Communism, which it saw as totalitarian (Joseny 1957: 2–5).

The connection emphasised here, between nationalism, anti-colonialism, and socialist and Communist movements, was crucial. Of course, the relationship between each of these political elements varied according to local conditions. For example, the PKI, which became the largest Communist party in the non-Communist world, came to see 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).

However, in Malaysia, the Communists had abandoned peaceful and constitutional opposition to the reinstatement of colonialism, and had embarked on an armed struggle. The MCP was unable, though, to establish fully its struggle as a nationalist movement.

Given the united front tactics commonly used against colonial powers, left-wing influence can easily be exaggerated by conflating it with nationalism and anti-colonialism. However, if socialist revolutions elsewhere have occurred with little or no consent among the population to socialist values (Colburn and Rahman 1992: 159–73), and created problems thereafter, then the successful conclusion of nationalist struggles in Southeast Asia certainly did not advance socialist ideas, the Left soon being moved off the legal political stage, perhaps defeated by its own success. This had little to do with the success of Left ideology or values, but with the ability of the Left to build links with labour and, in some cases, the peasantry, and the west's perception of the success of International Communism.

Working and living conditions had deteriorated during the war, with food and commodity shortages and inflation common. Under such conditions worker unrest increased, with the Left and the anti-colonial movement able to capitalise on this. By 1947, for example, the MCP-dominated Singapore General Labour Union (GLU) controlled three-quarters of the organised workforce. In Thailand, labour organisation increased, and a major labour confederation, the Central Labour Union (CLU), was formed. A new generation of labour leaders, much influenced by Marxism and close to the CPT, emerged to lead the labour unions. Their approach was attractive, and by early 1949 CLU membership was 60,000. In Indonesia, the PKI also had strong links with labour which supported its programme.

The radical wing of the labour movement can be seen as a part of the rise of a more generalised Left discourse. As Reynolds (1987: 25) observed for Thailand, 'there was a distinctly Left orientation in Bangkok public discourse for a decade or so after World War II'. This was common throughout the region. For example, in Malaya and Singapore, while the colonial state attempted to repress labour after 1948, this was temporary. The fundamental grievances of students and workers, when combined with the unprecedented strength of anti-colonial feeling, were manifested in a new phase in the development of independent organisations. This involved labour, students, and, for the first time, formal political parties which geared up for the achievement of self-government. The radical unions played a critical role in mobilising the masses in this broad movement. Most of the strikes in Singapore involved demands for the release of imprisoned union officials, or were part of the broader Left strategy of keeping pressure up for full self-government (Turnbull 1982: 262).

Throughout the region, a feature of this period was the linking of a range of politically active groups within civil society. Leftist discourse, especially in labour circles, employed concepts of class, class struggle, and exploitation, seriously challenging nationalist and nationalist rhetoric which emphasised capitalist development. Significantly, while the authorities readily employed internal security forces and legislation to detain labour leaders and proscribe cultural and social organisations in which the Left was influential, these moves were not initially successful. Far more repressive measures were required. As labour conflicts continued, governments soon defined these actions as unlawful and constituting 'rebellion', and anti-Communist laws were made increasingly draconian. For example, in Thailand, the 1952 Act prevented attacks on 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). This did not end labour disputes, but it did restrict left-wing influence in the labour movement. In the Philippines, once the Left's influence had been reduced, collective bargaining was expanded after 1951.

The seemingly bright prospects for the Left after the Second World War were tarnished by the Cold War and the rise of US-sponsored anti-Communism and anti-neutralism. As is well known, the US and other western powers, shocked by the 'loss' of China and Eastern Europe,
and an apparent threat in Korea, moved quickly into the Cold War. Of course, Southeast Asia was concerned in this, being seen to be in the path of a southward movement of Communism (Bryce 1974: 130-91). As one US policy document explained:

South of the ominous mass that is Red China, Thailand, along with her embattled but still free neighbors, shares a peninsula. The Communists want it. They covet its riches. . . . They consider it [Thailand] a prize base, for like an oriental scimitar, the peninsula's tip is pointed at the throat of Indonesia. . . . In Malaya, Burma and Indo-China, Communist-led rebels plunder, kill and burn.

(Mutual Security Agency 1952: 1)

This Cold War mentality translated into support for actively pro-western and pro-business governments. In Thailand, for example, the US supported, through the CIA, generals in the police and army who were opposed to the Left. There is no doubt that this support for repressive political structures (the military, police, and internal security) was crucial in narrowing the political space, even for democrats and nationalists. Throughout Southeast Asia the US sustained and promoted anti-Communists: in Indochina, supporting the French, and then becoming directly involved; championing the military against Soekarno and the PKI in Indonesia; supporting Magaysay in the Philippines, against the Huk rebellion; in Burma and Cambodia opposing leaders defined as ‘dangerously neutral’; and in Malaya, supporting the British in their anti-Communist war.

This anti-Communism fitted well with the domestic agendas of increasingly authoritarian regimes whose repression was justified on the basis of developmental imperatives. The Left was increasingly identified as ‘alien’ and as a ‘fifth column’ movement, and this perspective was supported by western powers. It also found itself having to defend its political organisations, developed in the nationalist campaigns, as others moved to marginalise them from the political process and weaken their bases in civil society, most notably in trade unions. This absorbed much of the creative energy of socialist and Communist movements. Externally, the Cold War climate necessarily meant various pressures would be exerted to undermine socialist economic experiments and shore up market-oriented economies. Thus, by the mid-to late-1950s, throughout Southeast Asia, the Left, including anti-Communist socialists who had supported constitutional opposition, was being repressed or forced underground. In many places, repression resulted in an intensification of armed struggles.
challenging their own governments in the late 1960s, were decidedly uncomfortable with the prospect of student radicalism which they saw as subversive and manipulated by the Left. The result was that many took the Singapore road, introducing repressive measures.

These student activists did not operate in a vacuum, and the example of Thailand showed that students and intellectuals could be powerful forces for the expansion of political space. Indeed, the growth of solidarity movements between students, workers, peasants, and the downtrodden was greatly feared by the governments of the region, especially as students were seen as allies of Communists. But by the late 1970s authoritarian governments had again moved to close the political opening, and repressive regimes dominated the political stage throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s: the Marcos dynasty and its lackeys kept the pressure on through martial law, although some concessions were made; Thailand had a military government again, although limited elections were reintroduced in the early 1980s; New Order Indonesia was still under a military-dominated government, and Soeharto appeared stronger than ever; Lee and the PAP had further entrenched themselves in Singapore, having exercised internal security legislation and other means to harass critical public commentators and all legal opposition; and the Malaysian government had cracked down on opposition groups.

For the Left, the only glimmer of hope in this political gloom might have been the establishment of self-declared socialist governments in 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 reign of terror and hyper-nationalism which, while initially supported by many on the Left, was only concluded when Vietnam invaded. The result of this was a brief but bloody war between China and Vietnam, which threw most of the Left in Southeast Asia into confusion. This confusion was amplified by the strange sight of the US and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) supporting their former enemy, the murderous Khmer Rouge, and the Chinese in opposing Vietnam.

These strange events also had much to do with the implosion of the CPT. In 1977 the CPT could claim more than 15,000 under its banner, and was waging an armed struggle, apparently with considerable success, reinforced by thousands who had fled right-wing repression after the 1976 coup. However, the CPT, dominated by a leadership allied to China, had been unable to incorporate the young and idealistic revolutionaries from urban areas. In supporting the Khmer Rouge and China, the CPT lost its bases in Vietnam and Laos, and then ‘lost’ its internal debate with students and intellectuals who willingly accepted a government amnesty. By the early 1980s, the CPT was dead. Only in the Philippines, where antagonism to Marcos united the opposition in a way not seen since the Second World War, did an armed struggle continue and grow. Even here, however, there were splits within the party.

It should also be noted that the changing nature of international production had a major impact in the region. The tendency of international capital, beginning in the 1960s, was to transfer labour-intensive manufacturing production to the developing world to exploit lower labour costs. Not only did this boost economic growth in East Asia (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea), but it also proved timely for Southeast Asia. For example, following the mid-1960s failure of the political merger with Malaysia, Singapore’s policy makers realised that with no prospect for a larger market for manufactured goods – the basis of Singapore’s import-substitution industrialisation strategy – a different strategy was required. Singapore led the way, to be followed by Malaysia, Thailand, and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia and the Philippines, in moving to a more export-oriented industrialisation (EOI) strategy.

Such a move in production did not cause the decline of the Left; indeed, since the move from ISI to EOI actually expanded the industrial workforce, it might have been expected that this would enhance the Left’s political potential. However, as the region’s states moved to create their comparative advantage as low-wage manufacturing sites, independent unions were smashed, seriously weakening the Left (Fiebel et al. 1980; Deyo 1981; Rodan 1989).

At the same time, three other nails appeared poised to be driven into the coffin of the Left in Southeast Asia: first, the move to ‘market socialism’ in China; second, the political and economic collapse in Eastern Europe; and third, the amazing economic success of the capitalist Southeast Asian countries (with the Philippines the partial exception), in stark contrast to the stagnation of the Indo-Chinese countries. But, as we have already suggested, this is not the end of history, and there is reason to embark on a deeper analysis of political and economic change and the political prospects for the Left.

THE LEFT AND CONTEMPORARY SOUTHEAST ASIA

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the 1980s and 1990s appear bleak for the Left in Southeast Asia. We have also noted that the most enduring of Left strategies has involved the support of labour. This area
of activism has been seen by various kinds of regimes as a powerful threat. So the rapid economic development of Southeast Asia, driven by strong, local capitalist classes, might have been expected to present an opportunity for the Left, organising among the growing working class. Yet this has not been the case. Why?

An important point to emphasise is that changes to the global political economy have facilitated a positive capitalist alternative for developing countries which has greatly undercut socialism’s potential appeal in the region. One of these was, of course, the search by international capital for the low-cost manufacturing export bases which began in the 1960s. More recently, the conceptualisation by international capital of the global economy in terms of three economic regions – Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific – has meant a ‘regional focus’ (Ng and Soo 1991). This emphasises the importance of honing operations to the peculiarities of local markets and affords more autonomy to transnational corporations’ (TNC) subsidiaries. Consequently, Asia is elevated from the status of a site for low-cost production to be exported to consumer markets elsewhere to a crucial set of markets in its own right. Commensurate with this is a preparedness by TNCs to invest in higher value-added products and processes – both within and beyond the manufacturing sector – than was previously the case. In conjunction with the internationalisation of capital emanating from the region and the forging of structural linkages between the different regional economies, this investment pattern further bolsters capitalism in the region.

This process appears to be deepening capitalist accumulation, giving rise to a capitalist development alternative in Southeast Asia. For the argument here, the significant issue is that remarkable capitalist economic development (with the exception of the Philippines) has been achieved with associated authoritarianism. Indeed, Southeast Asian leaders have used economic success to boost their political legitimacy and to justify authoritarian regimes in Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia. Furthermore, capitalist development has been rendered a source of nationalist pride – in stark contrast from the earlier phases of civil society expansion.

So it is not just the negative example of state-led socialist experiments around the world that has reduced the appeal of socialism in Southeast Asia, but the demonstrable achievements of capitalism in Asia and the seemingly bright prospects it holds for the future. This has been especially noticeable in Thailand. Many of those who joined the CPT in the 1970s and 1980s have returned to urban life to become successful business people, suggesting that Communism was a dead-end. They argue that the best they can now hope for is a capitalism with

some heart, meaning that some of its rough, exploitative edges are taken off. In essence, ‘socialism as collectivism’ is no longer a supportable goal, even for some on the Left, and has been replaced by a growing interest in more limited but laudable political goals including human rights, liberty, constitutions, and representative forms.

Paradoxically, it is the success of capitalist revolutions and the decline of socialist models which have raised the prospect of political change. The social transformations in Southeast Asian societies have not only involved the expansion of capitalist and working classes, but the emergence of sizeable middle classes, with each of these classes being segmented (see Robison and Goodman 1993). The social, political, and cultural manifestations of this process are complex, and there is a literature which seeks pressures for new organisational forms to protect and advance the particular interests of these strata as an unavoidable byproduct of economic development.

As we have already argued, the historical evidence contradicts the assumption that the development of civil society in capitalist societies is a progressive and incremental outcome of economic growth. Rather, civil society has ebbed and flowed in the region throughout this century. For us, the significance of the current social transformations brought by advanced forms of capitalist accumulation lies in the nature of new social groups. As we have seen, at different periods in the histories of Southeast Asian societies, a range of social groups have succeeded in expanding the political space outside the state, even if this space has subsequently been closed as authoritarian regimes have reasserted their dominance.

Whereas independent labour organisations have been central to this periodic reconstitution of civil society in the past, what is significant in the current expansion of civil society is the greater social differentiation characterising the groups involved. It is important to acknowledge the expanding complexity of Southeast Asian social structures. The increasingly numerous and differentiated middle class encompasses a range of professionals, public and private bureaucrats, and the self-employed. The growth of this class is generated out of expanded capitalist development, which also sees an ever more complex bourgeois class engaged in diverse domestic and global accumulation strategies. Not surprisingly, these processes generate new political aspirations and demands, some of which reflect the new material conditions. Hence, environmental and consumer organisations, for instance, have joined professional and employer associations to establish their identity in civil society.

From the mid-1980s, there has been a rapid expansion of business
and professional organisations in many parts of Southeast Asia. In
Indonesia and Thailand at least, some of these groups have achieved
considerable political power. A new literature, much of it placing a
heavy emphasis on instrumental relationships between business
and government, has emerged in recent years in recognition of this.
MacIntyre (1992) has demonstrated that industry associations and
business groups have been able to use the Indonesian state’s corporatist
structures to derive benefits which are for their members, not for the
state. This, he argues, involves an expansion of political representation.
For Thailand, MacIntyre (1990: 32–3) suggests that the representation
of organised business on joint government bodies has allowed it to deal
directly and independently with government and to shape policy. Anek,
also writing on Thailand, argues that business associations have become
autonomous of the state, acting as interest groups, that organised
business has had a significant influence on the pattern of economic
development, and that like ‘South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore’, there
are ‘... close and supportive relations between the government and
organised business’ (Anek 1992: 15).11

Even in Singapore, and despite the government’s brusque treatment
of non-state groups in the 1980s, notably the Law Society and lay
religious organisations (Rodin 1993: 91–6), some middle-class and
professional organisations have emerged or become more active since
the late 1980s. The most notable of these have been the Nature Society
of Singapore, the Association of Women for Action and Research, and
the Association of Muslim Professionals. The evolution of these three
groups reflects a perception that existing political structures inade-
quately accommodate distinctive views and interests.

As we stressed earlier (p. 41), following Bernhard (1993), the
existence of autonomous organisations requires the sanction of the
state. This means that the existence of some of these organisations
might be highly conditional: as soon as the state defines their activities
as political, they are in trouble. This is especially so in Singapore,
where legislation means they face the threat of deregistration should
they be seen to pose a challenge to the PAP’s authority by acting
‘politically’. Equally, the threat of being co-opted by the government
is real, and corporatism has meant that it is sometimes difficult to
distinguish between state and non-state organisations. For example, in
Thailand, the government ordered the establishment of provincial
chambers of commerce, while claiming that they are private and
voluntary (Anek 1992). Nevertheless, and despite the moderate political objectives of many
of these organisations, some do represent attempts to negotiate li-
creased political space, separate from the state’s extensive bureaucratic
structures. Through the demarcation of this non-state space, some form
of political contestation becomes possible. This is true even if, in order
to avoid proscription and co-optation, contestation can be neither
confrontational nor particularly public. Even so, owing to the class
nature of the constituencies and leaderships of these organisations,
which are disproportionately middle class, contestation will inevitably
be circumspect. Many of them also proclaim, as they must, a non-
ideological position, and it is fair to say that they see themselves in
this light.

At the same time, the position of independent labour organisations
has substantially altered. In the past, linkages between labour and
political opposition movements have posed a challenge to authoritarian
regimes, both colonial and post-colonial. But the legacy of decades
of authoritarian rule has been seriously destabilising for labour. The
institutionalised incorporation of labour into the structures of the state
is now well advanced throughout the region, and the existence of
independent labour organisations is everywhere threatened. This is not
to say that all unions were co-opted by the state. For instance, in the
Philippines a vigorous independent movement exists, and attempts
continue to establish independent unions in Thailand, Malaysia and
Indonesia.

Today, the underprivileged, who are not often wage labourers, find
their interests being represented by groups outside labour movements.
NGOs are not only leading this, but are also critical avenues for
expanding the political space of civil society. Significantly, though, the
agenda and constituencies of such independent organisations do not
afford labour the control and influence offered by trade unions. None
of this rules out the possibility of the Left shaping politics in con-
temporary Southeast Asia, but it does suggest that the sites of struggle
will be varied, as will the political alliances involving the Left. Neither
are the sites of struggle necessarily going to be the constitutional
oppositions and political parties. After all, the experience in Southeast
Asia has been that parliaments and elections do not necessarily mean
increased popular representation. The rise of capitalism, middle classes,
and electoral politics can increase representation for some classes, but
not necessarily for the masses.12

In Southeast Asia there are various opposition groups and movements
outside this narrow, party-political focus, and many of these operate in
a manner which distinguishes them from the influence or lobby groups
to central to liberal-pluralist democratic theory. Specifically, they are
activists and do not appear to act as more or less narrow advocacy
groups, for they marshal support from a range of groups and classes in society. Good examples of this kind of non-state group are the activist development NGOs which have become important political actors since the early 1980s.

There has been considerable enthusiasm concerning the political potential of NGOs. For example, Jones (1993: 70), writing of Southeast Asia, argues that: 'NGOs. . .have been chipping away at entrenched power structures. . . They have played a critical role in forcing governments to listen to the demands of the poor, the marginalised and the abused.'

Not all analysts are so enthusiastic, pointing out that many NGOs are not non-governmental at all, having been co-opted by government, and noting that many are self-interested and self-promoting.13 Indeed, the roles of NGOs in Southeast Asia vary, from high-profile activism in the Philippines and Thailand, to a more moderate role in Indonesia and Malaysia, a very limited one in Singapore, and virtual non-existence in Burma and Laos. Even allowing for this, the political role of NGOs has been remarkable.

In theory, NGOs are defined as voluntary and non-profit-making associations with development-oriented goals. Therefore, NGOs are not necessarily defined as political opposition by governments, at least initially. Indeed, NGOs often shy away from institutionalised relationships with political parties, arguing that these can be no more than their allies, not their leaders (Rahmana 1989: 7; see also Clark 1991: 18). However, as NGOs have matured and so-called grassroots development strategies have emerged, so their political role has been delineated. While not all NGOs are politically radical in Southeast Asia, many have experienced a degree of radicalisation.

It is often argued that this radicalisation is due to the nature of their development activities. Saseoto (1989: 19) points out that most NGOs are not 'the grassroots', but in fact are most often drawn from 'urban intellectuals and middle class groups', and are certainly not social movements. Despite this, he argues that they act in a class-biased manner, working for the poor and taking risks, knowing the economic and political costs involved.

A new development NGO ideology has evolved out of their work. Many have learnt that development practice cannot be neutral and that empowerment of the poor, disorganised, and disenfranchised is the key to 'real' development. To the extent that these organisations exploit their location in civil society to agitate for an empowerment of underprivileged classes, they represent a force for substantive democracy, and one through which Left values can be promoted. While they do not constitute social or political movements, they have the potential to act as a catalyst for them through the legitimisation of class-based action. In this sense, they are not so much alternatives to more traditional Left organisations, such as trade unions, as complements to them. In addition, poverty has been defined as a political issue, as it has a lot to do with powerlessness. NGOs have learnt that development projects are more successful 'if they are based on people's own analysis of the problems they face and their solutions' (Clark 1991: 102). In essence, this suggests an approach to participation, representation, and collective action, where political action on a national or even international stage is necessary.

In other words, their ideology and methodologies create an imperative for NGOs to expand the political space at all levels of their operations. As has been demonstrated in all of the countries of Southeast Asia, this can involve the building of oppositional coalitions between unions, development groups, women, religious groups, and environmentalists. Most importantly, and like the Left in earlier periods, NGOs assist dissidents by maintaining an intellectual life, providing space for ideological debate (Padron 1987: 75).

The oppositional status of NGOs is demonstrated where authoritarian regimes have been replaced by more representative forms, as in Thailand and the Philippines. In Thailand, NGOs played leading and coordinating roles in the events of 1991 and 1992 which eventually led to the demise of yet another military government. Earlier, in 1986, NGOs played a similar role in overthrowing the Marcos regime.14 Significantly, following these events, many of these NGOs still find themselves having to challenge government at all levels, supporting the poor and arguing for greater representation and participation in policy-making at all levels. Much of this tension between NGOs and governments arises from differing approaches to development.

Clearly, then, the current struggle to re-establish civil society in Southeast Asia involves quite different circumstances for the Left. Some of these circumstances relate to the fact that capitalism in the region is now both embedded and flourishing, but there are also more universal factors concerning the currency of socialism and Communism. Even in the established liberal democracies outside Southeast Asia, quite extensive re-evaluation of and by the Left is leading to similar conclusions. Miliband (1994: 141) observed, for example, that 'no single organization of the Left will ever again be able to claim to represent all movements of protest and pressure, as Communist parties (and, less emphatically, social democratic parties as well) once did'. Instead, Miliband acknowledged that diverse social movements have
emerged, forming 'an important element of the coalition of forces which has to be constructed on the Left'. But at the same time, the challenge for socialists is to explain that 'radical demands, for democratisation, for equal rights, for the creation of communities of citizens, can only partially be met, if they can be met at all, within the existing structures of power and privilege ...' (Miliband 1994: 157). The case for a transformation of the capitalist state remains, since no other agency has 'the power to tackle the multiple blights of capitalism', but, significantly, Miliband adopted a comparatively inclusive notion of 'the Left'.

Giddens (1994), similarly, does not believe the prospects for the Left are completely gloomy within the established liberal democracies, but goes even further in revising the notion of what 'the Left' actually means in the contemporary context. While he sees importance in retaining core socialist values, this is part of a broader emphasis on a philosophic conservatism involving a range of social movements trying to defend previous reformist gains and the environment from the onslaught of neo-liberalism. Moreover, he contends that a new radical politics needs, among other things, to accommodate aspirations and needs for autonomy and independence as well as selective forms of social collectivism. However, Giddens has in mind a very different notion of individualism here from that associated with the market. According to Giddens (1994: 13), 'in a world of high reflexivity, an individual must achieve a certain degree of autonomy of action as a condition of being able to survive and forge a life; but autonomy is not the same as egoism and moreover implies reciprocity and interdependence.' Without entering into an evaluation of Giddens's approach, he is clearly attempting to reconcile a complex variety of political positions and, in so doing, opens up the notion of 'the Left' even further than Miliband.

This apparent 'watering down' of the Left is also reflected in Gort's notion that what distinguishes the Left now is its insistence on social limits on the application of economic rationality. However, the eradication of economic rationality altogether is dismissed as impossible, or likely to lead to a totalitarian society (Gort 1994; 1991; 1989). Similarly, Kallschueher (1995: 136) maintains that today, to be 'Left' is to subscribe to a strong version of liberalism which delivers checks and balances 'not only between the branches of administration, legislation and the courts, but between the various spheres of social activity, judgement and distribution which are economic, cultural and religious life'. He calls for economic values to be counterbalanced by Left values of egalitarianism.

As Kallschueher (1995: 138) sees it, these values could be deployed to address the social consequences of modernity, namely the autonomisation of several subsystems of rationality, without suppressing individual preference and choice. The post-modernist embrace of pluralism of course leads to a championing of liberalism. Mouffe (1995: 206) calls for a 'complete reversal of Left identity' in which the values of homogeneity, equality, and harmony are replaced by pluralism, difference, and heterogeneity. Individual freedom and liberty, Mouffe maintains, should be elevated to at least the same status as equality.

As we have seen above, within Southeast Asia the traditional Left is also having to contend with the difficulties of social differentiation associated with industrialisation, although this is a comparatively embryonic process. A more fundamental problem has been the concerted obstruction of independent trade unions, while the expansion of wage labour continues apace. Most importantly, in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, capitalism has not had a complete victory. Rather, with the rapid maturation of capitalism, the social shortcomings and contradictions of market relations increasingly manifest themselves in political problems for governments in the region. Many of the existing conflicts and disputes in Southeast Asia are fundamentally about the naked exploitation and oppression of capitalism, both in the human and environmental dimensions. Where economic development is most advanced, increased conspicuous consumption only highlights material inequalities. It also remains to be seen whether regimes in Southeast Asia will be able to limit the provision of public goods within such a climate. Pressures are certainly building for the provision of social infrastructures that are unlikely to be generated by the private market. So the potential still exists for influence to be exerted by social democratic ideas based around a coalition of social forces, rather than through a mass organisation.

In addition, heightened resentment of authoritarian political structures among the relatively privileged classes is also evident. Indeed, the demands people are making are not for socialism, but for representation in policy making. It is this dynamic which underlies the recent development of independent organisations and the push for an expanded civil society. However, the different elements of the Left have particular views on issues of representation and participation, so debates about these concepts could create an opportunity for the Left to regain some influence.

CONCLUSION
As the historical survey of the Left in Southeast Asia illustrates, the current attempt to expand the space of civil society is only the latest,
rather than the first, such attempt. The economic triumph of capitalism in Southeast Asia is certainly critical in creating this latest historical opportunity, but it is not the sole determinant of it. Nor does it set in train an inexorable, even if protracted, force for political pluralism and liberal democracy. Rather, it represents another historical opportunity for the establishment of a more expansive civil society which, as before, includes, but does not guarantee, these possibilities.

What is different about this particular attempt which does relate to capitalist development is the possibility that on this occasion the political space will be more resilient and less vulnerable to repression than it has been in the past. This is because important elements within the capitalist and middle classes appear to be supportive of the current expansion of political space and increased representation for their interests. In the past, the dominant classes were often supportive of authoritarian reversals, since they perceived the push for increased political space as being led by working-class organisations, supported by Communists and socialists. This political space, however, can be genuinely independent without necessarily embodying liberal democracy.

This discussion has identified some emerging non-state organisations whose class composition predisposes them towards rather limited forms of contestation over state power. They are jockeying within the political system to operate as interest or lobby groups and are vulnerable to co-optation. Others, namely the activist NGOs, demonstrate broader objectives and are less likely to be removed from the constitutional political process. The Left's accustomed position as a strategic leader in the struggle for civil society is absent this time around, although the social and environmental consequences of capitalist development will continue to generate concerns which are central to the Left. To exert an influence over the political responses to those concerns, the Left has little option but to work through the various organisations attempting to articulate these concerns, rather than bring them under the umbrella of a broad social movement. What the current juncture in political contestation underlines is that, while the history of civil society in Southeast Asia has ebbed and flowed, its complexity is not neatly reproduced from one phase to the next.

NOTES

* The authors thank John Girling, Andrew Brown, Jane Hutchinson, and two anonymous referees for their comments and criticisms. We also thank Merlin Press Limited and Leo Panitch for permission to use material from an earlier version of this chapter published by them. Finally, we are grateful for research assistance provided by Damien Keever.
By social reification, Giddens (1994: 6) is referring to the process of individuals having to filter all sorts of information and have to routinely act upon it in a 'detraditionalizing society'. Whether, in fact, this process described by Giddens is peculiar to advanced capitalist societies is, however, open to question.

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