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Civil Society's Inconsistent Liberalism in Southeast Asia: Exercising Accountability Along Differing Diagonals

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Abstract

Predating but intensifying with the public health and economic crises COVID-19 sparked has been a political one, of democratic decline or autocratic consolidation, across much of Southeast Asia. Concerned actors and organisations from civil society have acted as fire-walls against democratic decline or autocratisation, even as fellow civil society organisations (CSOs) have exerted countervailing, anti-democratic pressure. Indeed, CSOs may be no more progressive than the state, nor fully autonomous from it, and may be debilitatingly fragmented or polarised. And yet across the region, CSOs still disrupt regimes' would-be panoptic scrutiny and authority, by presenting alternative spaces and premises for mobilisation and voice, through a range of modalities. Regardless of their ideological stance, CSOs' political engagement represents the promise or exercise of diagonal accountability. This check interacts with vertical and horizontal dimensions and retains the potential for meaningful intervention – but need not pull in a liberal direction.

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The past few years have been rough for Southeast Asia, as for the rest of the world. COVID-19 has killed almost 370,000 in the region[1]; many times that number have fallen ill. Prolonged isolation and anxiety taxed mental health across communities during lockdowns, students (and their parents) struggled with online learning, and livelihoods were disrupted. Government aid missed key communities such as migrant workers, and could not possibly make up for what was lost, regardless. And amid the turmoil, politics edged towards illiberalism – a direction in which states across the region had already been drifting if not lurching. The pandemic blurred the lines between just and abusive emergency measures: securitisation of state functions, including stepped-up surveillance, seemed reasonable (e.g. Honna, 2020). Anti-democratic actors seised the moment, reversing gains in Malaysia and Myanmar, and reinforcing patterns in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Defying pandemic controls, angry citizens across the region pushed back, taking to the streets in spectacular form in Thailand and Myanmar, and still energetically in Malaysia, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Sometimes. Other times, just as before the pandemic, many did not, or their mobilisation favoured illiberal outcomes. The reality of notable waves of protest and democratic regression across much of the region hints at how complex a space civil society is: social activism features on both fronts. As Southeast Asian states begin to extricate themselves from multiple crises – of health and well-being, of economics, and of politics – we shall see what the return to a more "normal politics" brings. Recent experience suggests that the role of civil society along that path will remain fraught. But importantly, that experience suggests that civil society will retain a role.

Although the number of formal democracies has increased in Southeast Asia since the 1980s, many of those transitions have failed to consolidate, have stalled at an essentially hybrid point, or have regressed. Indonesia and the Philippines – for a time the democratic stars of the region – have experienced serious democratic backsliding; democracy in Myanmar has broken down completely; authoritarianism has entrenched itself in Cambodia; Thailand remains on a regime rollercoaster; and Malaysia has (thus far) been unable to make the leap from electoral turnover to systemic democratic transition. Academic analyses of these regimes' trajectories tend to focus on structural features such as elections or leadership – in recent years, especially the rise through elections of the likes of the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte or Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. Such works home in on forces that might exert horizontal or vertical accountability: that is, institutional (horizontal) or electoral (vertical) checks on anti-democratic tendencies. Equally important, yet less commonly addressed, are sources of diagonal accountability (Lührmann et al., 2020), or how specifically civil society, including both its real-world and online components, might seek to arrest democratic decline.

The balance of civil society organisations (CSOs) in a given polity may be as likely to support as opposed to the state; either way, they perform a key political function, in exercising diagonal accountability. Doing so retains and confirms the potential for CSOs' meaningful intervention, especially when the state is in flux or under strain. At such

times, institutional actors may not be willing or able to exercise their own accountability checks, or polarisation in their ranks may leave the regime seesawing between stances. The key caveat, though, is that the standards to which CSOs, too, may seek to hold the state may vary. Civil society has not lost its power as arbiter of political outcomes, even amid institutional backsliding. However, CSOs' ideological premises and policy preferences may pull along differing diagonals.

An image of CSOs' uniting as one to promote democracy and resist authoritarianism carries real resonance: memories of People Power in the Philippines, Reformasi in Indonesia, or the so-called Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, for instance, remain strong (see also, e.g. Cohen and Arato, 1992). And we see ample current evidence that this role does matter – consider Myanmar's vast and courageous present-day civil disobedience movement (CDM). But as a theoretical premise, this conception is incomplete. CSOs may be no more progressive than the state, nor fully functionally autonomous from it. They may also be debilitatingly fragmented or polarised (Lorch, 2021). Yet CSOs still do disrupt regimes' would-be panoptic scrutiny and authority, by presenting alternative spaces and premises for mobilisation and voice. It is not that it is solely up to civil society to accept the opportunity and responsibility of pressing liberalisation. Political parties, influential or ordinary individuals, international partners or allies, courts, and media platforms all share that burden. But CSOs do have a particular capacity to raise awareness or galvanise public opinion, and wield a unique sort of check: diagonal accountability as "actors outside of formal political institutions," to supplement vertical and horizontal dimensions (Lührmann et al., 2020: 812).

The pandemic has arguably emphasised that role, given how sharply it has exposed the underlying workings of politics. As Peter Gourevitch (1986: 17) noted, in reflecting on an earlier rough period in the 1970s,

> In prosperous times it is easy to forget the importance of power in the making of policy. Social systems appear stable, and the economy works with sufficient regularity that its rules can be modeled as if they functioned without social referent. In difficult economic times this comfortable illusion disintegrates. Patterns unravel, economic models come into conflict, and policy prescriptions diverge. Prosperity blurs a truth that hard times make clearer: the choice made among conflicting policy proposals emerges out of politics.

I would argue that these newly apparent trade-offs are not limited to narrow questions of policy, but extend to broader questions of priorities and tradeoffs in politics. When the pie is shrinking, or when personal freedom is at odds with collective safety, do we prioritise normative commitments or practical self-interest? It is thus in this fraught period that we might expect to see yet more of these tensions revealed, including between differing conceptions of the role and scope of the state and the parameters of the national community. Or more simply: we will likely see both activism and reactions, working in different directions vis-à-vis a democratic standard.

To explore these patterns, and the complex political potential CSOs retain in Southeast Asia, we begin with some background.

Core Concepts

Southeast Asian CSOs deploy political power, but with varied objectives – not just advocating for different policies, but also for different visions of the overarching regime. We can see forces within Southeast Asian civil societies as working either to promote liberalisation, proactively or reactively, whether from a democratic starting point or not; or to accept or even advance democratic erosion or autocratic retrenchment. Consider Thailand's "red shirts" and "yellow shirts" (see Bünte, 2023): both manifestations of citizen activism, but working in countervailing directions. Indeed, actors and organisations within a given civil society may both promote and obstruct democratisation, across segments or over time, contingent on prevailing circumstances and opportunities. Civil society in contemporary Southeast Asia may thus be a solution to, or an adjunct to, democracy's frailties. To address how and why it plays such a role requires, first, that we consider what those illiberal tendencies are, then clarify what we might include within "civil society" in the region.

Backsliding and Autocratisation

A full assessment of democracy (and non-democracy) in Southeast Asia would be beyond the scope of this discussion. Luckily, a plethora of scholars have taken on that charge already (for just a few, Case, 2002; Fossati and i Coma, 2023; Mietzner, 2021; Rodan, 2018). But we can address change – to what extent regimes in the region are becoming more or less democratic – in order to home in on the role of civil society in, or against, that process.

The literature on democratic "backsliding," "regression," or "deconsolidation," or sibling "autocratisation" or "autocratic consolidation" has been proliferating since at least the 1990s – as the post-Soviet dénouement of the "third wave" ebbed – but remains messy at best.[2] The concept refers broadly to "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Bermeo, 2016: 5), or, downplaying questions of agency: "substantial decline in the democratic quality of political institutions [and] processes in a given democracy" (Croissant and Haynes, 2021: 2). These works address two related processes: the erosion of democratic institutions and governance where these exist, or the decline of democratic attributes in authoritarian states. Democratisation may never have made so much headway, in reality, as optimistic assessments supposed (Levitsky and Way, 2015: 48–49); its reversal may also, or concomitantly, also be less dire than pessimists propose. I have suggested previously (Weiss, 2022) that scholars have been inclined to read too much into minor oscillations in regimes such as Malaysia's: a regime that has not transitioned to liberal democracy might not be backsliding so much as standing pat when it reveals its illiberal aspects. And we do need to consider also the sort of democracy emplaced in the first place if asking about democratic regression.

A useful rubric for backsliding is "degradation in at least two [from among] … competition, participation, and accountability" (Waldner and Lust, 2018: 95). When decline

tips to all-out regime change, we refer to "democratic breakdown." Myanmar is a distressingly excellent example, however incomplete its initial democratisation. This literature dovetails with a contemporary, unsurprising emphasis on populism specifically. Anna Lührmann (2021), for instance, conceptualises autocratisation in terms of a progression by which popular discontent with democracy and political parties propels anti-pluralists (especially populists) into power through elections, allowing those leaders to erode democracy from within. Haggard and Kaufman (2021: 2, 14–17) likewise trace the roots of executive strengthening to the election of autocrats and sympathetic antisystem legislators as a consequence of social and political polarisation, particularly with a majoritarian, populist drift.

So do we see these processes at work in present-day Southeast Asia? Yes, we do. That conclusion is hardly controversial, even if the concept may be frequently stretched. Again, others have made this claim effectively; I will not repeat their effort here. But the case for erosion-in-progress is especially clear for the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand – countries with reasonably long histories of at least "low-quality" democracy (Case, 2009). While institutional decline is not new in any of the three, the pandemic made it worse: all three regimes had already "fallen back behind their past democratic peaks" pre-pandemic (Mietzner, 2021: 4), then made use of the crisis to tighten their grip. As Marcus Mietzner (2021: 3) puts it, "the dynamics of democratic decline prior to the pandemic are intrinsically linked to the effectiveness with which leaders tried to use the COVID-19 crisis to their political advantage, and they are certain to influence the character of democratic life in the post-pandemic order as well."

So we do see evidence of democratic decline, however, labelled, in Southeast Asia, starting before and accelerating during the pandemic. Before we can ask how civil society engaged with those processes, and how that effort has changed, we need a clear conceptualisation of civil society.

Civil Society

On face, the boundaries of "civil society" might seem fairly clear – some variation on the mantra of the sphere of associational life between family and state. The reality, though, is messier: do we include violent or "uncivil" groups, or those that accept state contracts, or those centred around a particular clan, or those that prefer to eschew anything more political than charitable services or recreation?

It helps to understand civil society, especially across the manifold regime types of Southeast Asia, in terms of *space* rather than as a delimited set of ideologies, substantive foci, or organisations. Eva Hansson and I (Weiss and Hansson, 2023: 4–9) draw out this conceptualisation in detail in a recent chapter. Within this fairly capacious space are "the gamut of social movements" and activists (Weiss and Hansson, 2023: 4). The potential tactical repertoire in question is vast: street protests, often with highly performative dimensions; legal cases (not just to press claims, but also in reverse: to harass activists); legislative action (policy advocacy or even constitutional input); strikes, slowdowns, and

other labour actions; often largely rhetorical solidarity campaigns and petitions; social-media campaigns (for instance, hashtags, memes, or information-sharing); colour-coded clothing or other markers; and more.

Civil society supports both self-organisation and the production of counter-discourses: it spans both neo-Tocquevillian and Gramscian aspects (Alagappa, 2004b: 469). And it accommodates elements or ideas more or less threatening to states', or fellow social actors', preferences, interests, or norms. Nor does civil society experience regulation and repression uniformly; these efforts vary across and even within polities. Authoritarian states in particular (but not exclusively) deem some claims for the "civic" public interest to be comparatively subversive and others, especially for "non-civic" private interests, less threatening or even useful as sentiment-barometers (Chen, 2020). Equally important: rather than frame "politics" as fundamentally the domain of the state (i.e. "political society," in the common political–economic–civil society trip-tych), it makes sense to understand the "informal" politics of civil society as still intrin-sically political. That aspect reaches within civil society, too, where we find capacities for contestation and control among actors and organisations (Weiss and Hansson, 2023: 9).

Recognising its character suggests what we can and cannot rightly expect of or from civil society, including in such broad domains as safeguarding "democracy." The pan-demic seems to have heightened rather than muted some of the contradictions inherent in a polyglot civil society. Economic stakes have sharpened over these past few years, especially as the ability to mix (or the unavoidability of mixing) with those from outside one's silos was so sharply suppressed, even as dissatisfaction with states ticked upwards. (A survey colleagues and I conducted in mid-2021 across five states in Southeast Asia found satisfaction levels with respondents' governments' response to the pandemic ranged from 43 to 62 percent in Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, in that order, albeit an impressive 87 percent in Singapore (Aspinall et al., 2021: 25).)

Garry Rodan (2022) offers a useful perspective. He suggests that the space of civil society has not been shrinking in Southeast Asia, as it has been in some other regions, but the mix of ideologies within this space, and their relationship to the state, has been changing. In his recent work, Rodan sees both democratic and anti-democratic ideas in civil societies in the region, but focuses less on how civil society advances core ideas than on "how and why spaces for contestation and reform differ from one country to another" (Rodan, 2022: 1). His proposed "modes of participation" framework homes in on "power relations within and between civil society and the state" as the key arbiter of civil society's scope for "political significance." That is, he examines the spaces and forms through which actors from civil society can participate, and the extent to which their participation has the capacity to challenge, or do more to legitimate or facilitate, state agendas and power relations (Rodan, 2022: 14; see also Rodan, 2009, 2018; Rodan and Jayasuriya, 2007).

I propose a somewhat different lens here. My focus is more on the regime effects CSOs seek and ideas they promote, whether or not they succeed, than the spaces and structures through which they do so, setting aside also the scope for more targeted

policy interventions. But my approach accepts his mix of modes as really foundational – not least for the critical perspective it demands on how we evaluate the fact of participation and the quality of voice. One key premise Rodan raises is that of class interests and contestation. Socioeconomic class features in much of the civil society canon, but largely in terms of a presumed teleological, monodirectional force, of the middle class as a harbinger for democracy. Particularly given how tenuous the pandemic rendered hard-won middle-class status for so many, it is worth a short digression to examine whether we should expect something special of members of the middle classes, either as they acquire that status or if they see it as slipping.

This tradition in the literature builds especially on foundational works by such scholars as Rueschemeyer et al. (1992). They propose that, with capitalist development, the working and middle classes grow and organise, while the bourgeoisie loses ground, even as the balance of power between state and society, and within transnational political-economic structures, also shifts. Capitalist economic transformation brings workers together and empowers them to associate in civil society, shifting the balance of power between classes, while also offering a "counterweight to state power" (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992: 6). Self-interest is key, though: the working class is more reliably pro-democratic than the middle classes, they argue, since the latter may endorse authoritarian suppression of popular pressures if inclusivity is not to their advantage. Other studies have taken a less nuanced, or simply different, approach to class structure, while still highlighting a connection between the middle class and civil society. Claus Offe, for instance, distinguishes between an old middle class that advances a politics tied up with questions of distribution, versus a "new" middle-class politics "typically … *of* a class but not *on behalf of* a class" (Offe, 1985: 833). This is the realm of new social movements around non-class-specific issues such as environmentalism, feminism, and peace. Either way, scholars presume the middle class is connected, if not always or unilaterally, with the efflorescence of civil society, and that a flourishing civil society deepens democracy. Much literature even today presumes that the middle class is the bedrock of both civil society and support for democracy – and sees these two phenomena as intrinsically intertwined.

The theoretical presumption of that link was sufficiently strong that much of the early – and continuing – work on civil society in Southeast Asia puzzled through why the middle classes in this region have strayed from that plot. Martin Gainsborough, for instance, noting that "the term 'middle class' is often used interchangeably with 'civil society'" (2002: 694, n.691), probes why communist Southeast Asia tells a different story. He finds the solution in the nature of economic development and the middle classes' undiminished and even increased dependence upon the state in a setting such as Vietnam. Jones and Brown (1994) find a similar middle-class/state symbiosis in Singapore, bolstered by state rhetoric of non-boat-rocking "Asian values" and a *kiasu* (self-centred and competitive) culture that inhibits political risk-taking. They highlight, too, the sort of "consensus" ideology that Rodan (2012: 320) also finds favours "functional and elitist conceptions of representation" rather than "a rights-based democratic politics." Current attention to democratic backsliding has revisited the seeming

unreliability of the Southeast Asian middle classes. Mietzner (2021: 4), for instance, traces democratic "deconsolidation" to "structural democratic deficiencies" (clientelism, politicisation of security forces, and "autocratic enclaves" in the polity) coupled with rising inequality, politicised largely in identity terms, generally by a populist leader, and "a middle class endorsing nondemocratic alternatives to secure its material and social status."

So the middle class, at least in Southeast Asia, is hardly an inherent source of challenge to a decreasingly democratic state – but is this still where we locate the crux of civil society? Much of this sphere of associational life does encompass the growing middle class. But part of the challenge now in defining a class basis for this domain is how increasingly complex it has become, particularly with the expansion of virtual space, on the one hand, and the stark relevance of one's structural position within the middle classes, which the pandemic spotlighted. The category spans from a salaried, professional segment readily able to work from anywhere, to hourly employees in unavoidably public-facing positions, to gig-economy workers who may thrive in "normal" times but lack basic financial security. Even as physically atomised individuals sought to maintain community and perhaps to mobilise through the pandemic, these segments' distinct interests loomed large.

Starting well before then, though, later-stage capitalism had encouraged class fragments to seek out more supportive categories. As Rodan explains, "ideological variations of identity politics are resonating with elements of middle classes now confronted with more precarious employment, rising living costs, and other pressures generated by neoliberal capitalism and market values. … It is against this background that assorted anti-liberal and anti-democratic civil society mobilisations surfaced in the last decade in Southeast Asia" (Rodan, 2022: 2). Among those he cites: Thai royalist yellow shirts; ethnoreligious movements in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysia; and support for Duterte's brutal "war on drugs" in the Philippines. The strains of the past three years have surely exacerbated these trends.

Nor is class the only potentially fractious identity within and among CSOs. CSOs are themselves institutions: places of employment, concerned for the day-to-day management of projects, crisscrossed by personal networks that inevitably shape alliance possibilities, and navigating often unreliable funding and other resources that complicate long-term planning towards a strategic vision. They confront their own dimensions of representation and axes of privilege that may well spark internal divisions and angst within organisations. CSOs vary immensely, on all dimensions – size, focus, ideology, repertoires, and understandings of how politics works. Some are better or worse at evading the regime's would-be panoptic scrutiny (Janjira, 2022); some are keen to recruit, or at least, to win support for their own frames or narratives. CSOs' or activists' goals may require finding or creating access points into, and seeking to work with or within, a state they or civil societal peers may malign or find ideologically problematic (Weiss, 2015). Nor are CSOs static, as their leaders, constituents, and context shift. An organisation that rallied for democracy in the past may do little to oppose its decline now.

In short, we should surely expect mixed outputs from this crowded space of civil society. We turn now to the ways in which organisations and actors from civil society might engage with democratic backsliding, particularly with COVID-19 and associated disarray as a looming backdrop.

Modes of (Dis)Engagement

As Eva Hansson and I (Weiss and Hansson, 2023: 5) argue,

> repression aside, civil society is neither exclusively pro-democracy nor pro-human rights: groups from across the ideological spectrum may occupy, thinly or densely, the space of civil society. To understand any CSO's or movement's implications for democracy, we need to grasp what ideas and motivations drive its efforts, its participants' worldview and ideology, where it fits among the power relations in civil society, its connection with political parties (apart from under the region's *de jure* or *de facto* single-party regimes), and how such connections translate into influence on 'formal' politics.

In other words, some CSOs seek democratisation or to hold the state accountable to a liberal or "progressive" standard; others thrive under, or support, authoritarian state leadership or ideas (Toepler et al., 2020: 652–653). And yet others prefer to focus primarily on ostensibly apolitical welfare- or service provision – although some definitions of civil society exclude activists or organisations that do not aim in some way "to influence the exercise of state power" (Rodan, 2022: 8). In Southeast Asia, we find also a generally "less equitable, open, and autonomous civil society" than much extant theory suggests, given social cleavages, systemic inequalities, or patterns of exclusion in the societies in which they develop (Weiss and Hansson, 2023: 6).

Perhaps more controversially to assert: this space includes not just "virtuous," peaceable groups, but also those sometimes labelled as "uncivil," or "groups that (generally partially and/or episodically) make use of violent means of protest," as well as groups that also pursue profit; delimiting otherwise would compromise our ability to comprehend important political developments (Weiss and Hansson, 2023: 7). That activist groups adopt violent methods tends to write them out of many readings of civil society. Reality is, of course, complex. First, specific modalities of violence do matter for what ends they communicate and whether they seek more to intimidate or to recruit (Boudreau, 2010). Also, many groups slip in and out of violence, depending on prevailing political opportunity structures, the nature of repression, and available allies – and the sorts of violence they or their partners engage in may still vary. Joakim Kreutz seeks to make sense of when and why groups otherwise or also engaged in "normal" political activities (policy advocacy, non-violent demonstrations, petitions, and so on) may turn to violence. Considering not ethnic armed organisations, but CSOs in Myanmar pursuing democracy, minority rights, protection for refugees, or related goals, which collaborate with armed groups or warlords, he traces their strategic choices to doing what needs to be done to have access to local populations and push for inclusion in peace deliberations (Kreutz, 2023).

Given that recap and caveat, what are the roles of civil society in democratic decline in Southeast Asia? Most importantly, to what extent do we see what Michael Bernhard (2020: 341) terms a "firewall civil society," entailing "civil society as the last layer of accountability when antidemocratic political actors have undermined the traditional pathways of vertical (electoral) and horizontal (separation of powers) accountability that make democracy a self-enforcing form of political rule"?

Homing in on civil society allows us to understand such decline in ways beyond what V-Dem ratings or institutional metrics indicate, and beyond a focus on, for instance, populist demagogues. Moreover, where civil society fits into a broader story of democratic reversal or authoritarian stagnation, amid varied modalities and stakes of engagement, matters; what is central to our story is not just what CSOs do in isolation, but how civil society overlaps and connects with the rest of the polity. And the whole transpires in perpetual flux. Pro-democratic activists seek to strengthen legal frameworks for the protection of civil liberties and protest; anti-democratic elites may seek instead to remake those institutions and rules to preclude mobilisation or challenge. New tensions seed new alignments among organisations, or new efforts to write "othered" groups out of the collective "we." Regimes may promote alternative vehicles to the organic versions in civil society – state-sponsored Islamist organisations to counter grassroots *dakwah* groups that sprouted in Malaysia in the 1970s–1980s, for instance – or may essay to infiltrate or coopt organisations on the ground, such as Cambodian trade unions. And all sides seek to maintain their stature: for instance, states for whom repression might erode their legitimacy, or activists who need to demonstrate ties with the grassroots or targeted constituencies to sustain theirs.

A quick glance at the segment of civil society space that best illustrates that fungibility clarifies how mutable all about this space is. For around a quarter-century now, online (or digital) space has been an intrinsic part of civil society. That role has spanned "virtual" protest in its own right, being a supplement or facilitator to "real-world" mobilisation, and/or how state actors push back to preempt or contain resistance. Different platforms, from webpages to blogging to social media, carry different implications (Lim, 2023). As Merlyna Lim (2023: 40–41) details, however important and even transformative online space has been for social movements,

> digital media, especially social media and their algorithms, were not designed for democratic political purposes. They are commercialised social spheres where individuals can partake in the consumption, production, and distribution of information, stories, ideas, and knowledge. … [They] do not create a fertile environment for progressive democratization where none exists, nor can they by themselves force reform on a reluctant regime prepared to use violence and repression as tools.

Moreover, technological capacity alone is not sufficient, if activists are better able to resist suppression offline than online.

But we are still left with the potential for diagonal accountability, and the directions in which it pulls. How, and under what conditions, do civil societal actors attempt to halt or

slow processes of democratic erosion, when do these efforts fail to thrive, and when do countervailing efforts predominate? To what extent, and in what ways, can this sort of accountability supplement or stand in for debilitated institutional and electoral checks to bolster politically liberal leanings, or when does it hasten or reinforce democratic decline? And to what extent do the earlier and lingering effects of the pandemic change these patterns?

To Promote Liberalisation

We can consider first the classic assumption of CSOs as "champions of democracy" (Lorch, 2021: 81). Indeed, we do see actors and organisations from civil society staging important interventions, both proactively to promote democracy and reactively to counter backsliding. Even in these cases, though, the record is more complex than a summary happy narrative suggests. That nuanced record sheds light on why we cannot expect unambiguously or uniformly pro-democratic efforts later, should these regimes retreat – as they have, in fact, done – from their democratic high points.

CSOs have a long history of proactive engagement against authoritarianism – for instance, the Reformasi movements of the late 1990s in Indonesia and Malaysia (though only one of these succeeded). Although their records were uneven across time and organisation, CSOs played critically important roles in galvanising opposition to authoritarianism, mediating among political leaders and parties, promoting agendas for reform, and more (Weiss, 2006). As Andreas Ufen describes, though, the CSOs that engage in such efforts, "often have no clear political agenda or change substantially over time. They frequently consist of factions with different objectives. … CSOs with ambiguous or hostile stances towards democracy often mobilise against politicians they perceive as liberal reformers" (Ufen, 2023: 113–114). Or consider People Power in the Philippines: yes, the masses took to the streets, but a plausible alternative explanation places greater agency in the defection of sidelined softliner or opposition elites, motivated more by desire for patronage and position than by democratising intent (Fukuoka, 2015). Yuki Fukuoka (2015) suggests that in the Philippines and Indonesia alike, "democratisation has failed to make a dent in old oligarchic power structures" (see also Hadiz, 2003).

Once the fact of a galvanising dictator is removed, moreover, cohesion may be hard to muster. Again, in the Philippines: in January 2001, efforts from civil society "to demand accountability and fairness from their leaders" succeeded in bringing down Joseph Estrada. But then just a few months later, in April and May, urban-poor Estrada supporters took to the streets, clearly with different interests and priorities from their middle-class counterparts. Explain Hutchcroft and Rocamora (2003: 282), the latter outburst "brought home the dangers inherent in a political system incapable of stemming the continued widening of the gap between the many poor and few rich." Thailand in 2005–2006 offered a parallel: there, too, "moral outrage motivated upper-class mobilisation" following corruption scandals against a leader highly popular among other segments (Thompson, 2008: 384). And in either place, the target was a democratically elected

leader, not an autocrat. Laments Mark Thompson (2008: 381), "In both countries, mass-based urban campaigns against authoritarianism have degenerated into an assault on democracy." The urban bourgeoisie's provisional support for liberalism hinged on business interests, whereas the urban poor, unsuccessful in securing agrarian or other reform, found appeal in populism (Thompson, 2008). We return to that pattern shortly.

So we do see proactive efforts to install democracies in the region, but activists' more prominent role in recent years in this region has been reactive, in pushing back against autocratisation. The most obvious examples in this vein are Myanmar and Thailand. Both have experienced waves of anti-authoritarian activism (though Thailand also sees especially energetic countermobilisation). The most recent round of protest in Myanmar has been against the junta's takeover in 2020, particularly via a mass CDM. In 2011, argues Kristian Stokke, CSOs also played a role, but that was a more top-down process. Perspectives on the role of civil society in the transition then saw "engagement-oriented CSOs as either drivers of reform or as pawns in the military's game of consolidating and legitimising autocratic power" (Stokke, 2023: 125). This time, that the transition is in the reverse direction leaves less doubt as to the attribution of agency.

Meanwhile, Thailand has had evolving waves of protest against military encroachments, but with declining success for civil resistance campaigns. Part of this shift reflects the changing terrain, and especially the rise of new regime tactics that make it harder for actors or organisations from civil society, however motivated, to mobilise to counter autocratisation or promote democratisation. Janjira Sombatpoonsiri finds autocracies particularly likely to suppress digital space, given their felt need to curb critical information and dissent, even when they have limited technological capacity. This digital repression – surveillance, content restriction, deployment of cyber or other laws, manipulating information via cyber troopers or trolls, and internet shutdowns – has become more targeted over time, resulting in lower "audience costs" or pushback (Janjira, 2022). She finds that the Thai government built up its technical, bureaucratic, and legal apparatus for digital repression starting in 2006. Increased surveillance, increasingly AI-guided; content-monitoring and URL-blocking in cooperation with ISPs; cybertrooper-led "information operations" against dissidents or in favour of the regime, as to spread scandalous disinformation about movement leaders; and using surveillance data to inform lawsuits against online dissidents have all helped to infirm pro-democratic mobilisation – and some has been in collaboration with royalist groups at the grassroots (Janjira, 2022).

To Advance or Accept Democratic Regression or Exclusivism

Indeed, the latter relationship warrants attention. Democratic regression in Southeast Asia has hardly been a wholly top-down process. In some countries, certainly – Cambodia or Myanmar – we can make a strong case for coercive authoritarian consolidation, pushed from above without regard or need for agreement on the ground. But in the flagship cases of democratic decline in the region today – Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand – support from below has been intrinsic to the process. And, I suggest, pandemic-related

shifts in civil society and states may serve to elevate or amplify those elements conducive to further erosion.

Scholars have long acknowledged the lack of a necessary connection between civil society and democracy or democratisation (e.g. Alagappa, 2004a). Even if they are still intertwined, they may not be symbiotically so. As Rodan reminds us, "if we define away all forces and values hostile to democracy—even where they act in a constitutional and non-violent manner—we limit our capacity to comprehend some of the most significant political associations and ideologies engaged in struggles to reshape and/or defend existing state power relationships in contemporary Southeast Asia—and elsewhere" (Rodan, 2022: 11). We might approach this non- or counter-democratic face of civil society in terms of either active mobilisation against democracy, or failing to resist its decline.

Thailand exemplifies the first such approach, including a specifically violent turn. Responding partly to Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's repression of civil society, the pro-coup (and pro-monarchy) People's Alliance for Democracy, or "yellow shirts," mobilised in 2006, then grew even more violent after the 2007 elections. The United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, or "red shirts," mobilised in response and took up arms after initial repression by the armed forces in 2009 (Kreutz, 2023: 195–196). At issue were and are foundational differences of interest and opinion about whom state policies should favour, what the guiding premises of the state should be, and who governs best. But this turn to violence, not against the state, but against fellow citizens, is something new.

The ambiguity other cases present reinforces the challenge of too-pat readings of who supports and opposes "democracy." Here we might turn to Indonesia. Chinese-Christian incumbent gubernatorial candidate Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (a.k.a. Ahok) lost the election in 2017 amid ethnoreligious agitation and blasphemy charges after his invocation of a Quranic verse in a speech. Critics (rightly) faulted illiberally exclusive ethnoreligious mobilisation as problematically anti-democratic (see Setiawan and Tomsa, 2023). Accounts contrasted aggressive anti-Ahok street demonstrations associated with the vigilantist Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders Front) with the "Teman Ahok" (Friends of Ahok) movement's peacefully collecting over one million affirmations of support in Ahok's defense. But Rita Padawangi offers a countervailing perspective that centres on Ahok's agenda for flood mitigation and urban development in Jakarta. Space and class come to the forefront: they shape distinctly different interests and preferences. Ahok executed a record number of forced evictions during his three years as governor; most of those evicted were Muslim; all came from "lower-working class neighbourhoods." An urban-poor CSO coalition asked all candidates for governor to sign a no-eviction pledge. Only Anies Baswedan, the eventual winner, did. Padawangi thus puts a more "democratic" spin on Ahok's defeat, in tracing it at least as much to urban-poor communities' exercise of voice as to ethnoreligious exclusivism. As she concludes, "while race and religion presented an appealing vantage point from which to assess the political role of civil society, these factors only offered a partial understanding, and one that perpetuates social polarization" (Padawangi, 2023: 72–73).

This alternative reading sheds light on why CSOs in the region have failed to exert strong diagonal accountability against backsliding; many seem simply to be sitting out the current decline. That so many among the Southeast Asian middle classes have seemed to prefer technocratic developmental states for their performance outcomes, regardless of trade-offs in terms of civil liberties and popular voice is hardly news. East and Southeast Asian tigers and dragons long ago disembowelled classic modernisation theory and its assumption that growth brings democracy, via middle-class yearnings. No states have been performing so well economically of late, yet interests, I would suggest, still loom large behind today's pockets of support for eroding democracy, or lack of will to oppose it.

New forms of elite capture represent one key facet. Jasmin Lorch makes this argument cogently in examining why even "vibrant" civil societies may fail to resist democratic backsliding. Weak democratic institutionalisation, she proposes, opens the door for political elites to capture and coopt CSOs. Some CSOs in Bangladesh, for instance, thought they could better influence public policy by throwing their strength behind the secular Awami League (AL) against the rival, more Islamist Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – even after a "promissory coup" in 2007, closer collaboration between the AL and the military after 2008 elections, and increasing polarisation as well as state repression. CSOs could still participate in service delivery, but their policymaking role and influence withered. Even as pro-AL CSOs started to rethink their allegiance, some still hesitated to turn against the party, disliking the BNP more (Lorch, 2021: 84–87).

Her take on developments in Thailand suggests a similar pattern. At the risk of oversimplification: elite polarisation between a royalist-military alliance and a pro-Thaksin, capitalist camp has permeated also through civil society. Rhetoric from the royal-military side, of communitarian, "Thai-style democracy," resonated among many CSOs, whose stance then opened up access to development programs and state resources. There is more to the story than this, including subsequent defections, especially after the 2014 coup. But conservative CSOs have not only retained far more freedom to mobilise than have red shirts, but have also used it to play active, even aggressive roles, in belittling and combatting the latter (Lorch, 2021: 87–89). Concur Aim Sinpeng and Aries Arugay (Sinpeng and Arugay, 2015: 108), a class-based explanation carries much weight, in this case: the Thai middle class "consistently has undemocratic tendencies and only supports democracy when its interests are not threatened." In the Philippines, too, middle-class elements had already proved open to challenging the decision of the poor majority of voters who rallied to elect Estrada in 1998. In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte drew support from "elite and middle-class voters worried about crime, corruption and systemic disjunction"; his rhetoric and actions then drew in also some on the left (albeit purportedly also with the promise of patronage) and pro-poor CSOs. That many of their members supported Duterte made it hard for human-rights CSOs to denounce his abuses; leftist CSOs who opposed Duterte, too, had difficulty relating to constituents who backed him, given anaemic links to the grassroots. Although civil societal support for Duterte weakened fairly quickly, his popularity – and his aggressive supporters,

especially on social media – made it hard for already fragmented and out-of-touch CSOs to push back (Lorch, 2021: 89–92).

These cases suggest a wider pattern, in which CSOs or activists that may have exercised a strong pro-democratic role under authoritarian rule find it much harder to hold the line, given a more democratic starting point. Their vested interests and, hence, antagonisms tend to be more complicated, and the gap between what is best for the middle classes and the working classes may be stark. Selective repression under less all-out coercive regimes accentuates those fault lines, as CSOs that accept cooptation evade the repression holdouts experience – and they may still believe, too, in the potential for change from within (e.g. Lorch, 2023, on Cambodia). The end result: civil societies that fail to exercise pro-democratic diagonal accountability, at the same time that horizontal and vertical accountability are also eroding.

Looking Beyond Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated trends already crystallising: most political regimes in the region are currently drifting towards autocracy, as democracy recedes, fails to consolidate, or slips further from reach, all the more so with pandemic-driven securitisation (Azmil and Por, 2020; Hapal, 2021; Mietzner, 2020, 2021; Supalak, 2020). Amid those shifts, the space of civil society, echoing that of formal politics, has grown more heatedly polarised rather than merely plural and contentious (Weiss and Hansson, 2023: 11).

It warrants asking what qualities the experience of the pandemic – not just the health-related aspects per se, but also the economic consequences and the implications for public trust and interaction across polarised groups – has heightened or suppressed in civil society. Given what seem links between this crisis period and illiberal trends in governance, should we expect more or less of civil society than we might otherwise?

It is not all bad. COVID-19 did not only shrink space, but also expanded it in some ways, as by showing what civil society can do to support communities in crisis and fortifying those ties, deepening connections between service delivery and activism, and framing current needs in terms of clearly political grievances, such as through critiques of neoliberal development (Lorch and Janjira, 2022). In this vein, the pandemic sparked what Rosalia Sciortino describes as "extraordinary levels of volunteerism and direct giving" (Sciortino, 2023: 169). Importantly for the potential for pushback against backsliding, she explains, "In many cases, the feeling of being 'left on their own' due to slow and fraught government responses and seeing many suffer due to lack of social protection and access to COVID-19 prevention, treatment, and now vaccination has moved many to donate cash or gifts of goods and services" (see also Azmil and Por, 2020). Most such assistance was for welfare, not to challenge government policies "except by exemplary action," but she sees "signs that individual funding is also starting to enable more contentious civic activism," as with links between "voluntarism and mutual aid" at protests in Thailand (Sciortino, 2023: 169).

Other indications are less positive. The manifest increase in economic precarity likely has, on the one hand, deepened the ranks of those disinclined to see their own self-

interests as aligned with those of an autocratising state. On the other hand, we have ample evidence of middle- and upper-class pushback against even popularly elected leaders too inclined to cater to working-class supporters. Individuals' calculations of their own interests and risks have surely recalibrated, given how deep the chasm was between those whose middle-class status the pandemic endangered, and those who could ride out the storm in comparative security. So we might assume a wash on this score.

Meanwhile, pandemic public health measures radically disrupted the spatial aspects of civil society. Padawangi (2023: 78) draws our attention to the salience of physical space, including vis-à-vis virtual space, explaining that "many issues of spatial accessibility may stay on the pragmatic level and be somewhat depoliticised, but … [a]ccess to space—both social and physical—is pertinent to any form of civil society, as space allows straddling between the apolitical and the political." That so much of the activity of civil society—indeed, of society generally—moved online during the pandemic has triggered what will surely be enduring effects. Virtual space, allowing as it does for extreme levels of siloisation, is especially conducive to monologic rather than dialogic or deliberative communication, and to polarisation along various axes. The much-remarked "infodemic," or "global epidemic of misinformation—spreading rapidly through social media platforms and other outlets" (Zarocostas, 2020: 676), applies to politics as well as to public health. As we have seen in recent elections in, for instance, the Philippines and Malaysia, an onslaught of input, from viral TikToks to revisionist histories and flat-out fake news, leaves social media users little time or mental space to adjudge what information is true or reliable. It is not only polarising populists who profit from activating biases and anxieties but also the gamut of would-be leaders, including affiliated CSOs, more concerned with advancing their own position than with fostering a healthy media landscape. That pattern will surely continue, making balanced consideration of causes and actors all the more challenging.

Conclusion

So where does this array of efforts and developments leave us? Civil society remains obviously important to any discussion of democratic health or decline in Southeast Asia, as anywhere. But that salience is both in support of liberalism and not averse to its reversal: the diagonals along which civil society pulls run both ways. We might hope that as the public health crisis subsides, renovation of a real-world public sphere helps to temper some of the most polarising potentials of digital space. We might hope, too, that as economies recover, economic pies come to seem less zero-sum – perhaps given newly urgent attention to the need for reliable safety-nets – encouraging alliances across middle-class fractions and renewed attention to priorities beyond basic needs. And the spark in social activism and advocacy the pandemic spurred could well prove sustainable.

But it is not as though the sailing were smooth prior to COVID-19's appearance. All told we can surely put faith in pro-democratic civil society to hold leaders accountable to some extent. However, part of their battle will remain with fellow activists with genuinely divergent interests and allegiances, as well as with rightly sceptical publics.

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Notes

1. https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries; as of 8 May 2023, the tally was 367,499.
2. This section draws on Weiss 2022.

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