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# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF CIVIL AND UNCIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

*Edited by*

*Eva Hansson and Meredith L. Weiss*



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## CONCLUSION

### Southeast Asia's glocalised<sup>1</sup> civil society landscapes: national topographies and transnational contours

*David Camroux*

On 30 June 2022, Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos, Jr. was inaugurated as president of the Philippines following a landslide victory in the elections of 9th May. The People Power Revolution<sup>2</sup> in the Philippines of 1986 had seen the overthrow of the dictatorship of his late father, President Ferdinand Marcos (1972–1986). Appealing to a return to a golden age – while whitewashing the brutality and plunder of his father’s presidency – Bongbong refused all debate during his campaign. His campaign was conducted largely on social media and involved a high level of disinformation (Eusebio 2022) and the employment of paid trolls (Wallis et al. 2021). His election rode on a wave of authoritarian nostalgia seen also elsewhere in Asia (Chang et al. 2007).

The Philippine case is not unique. In Indonesia, in 2014 and 2019, presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto, the ex-son-in-law of former Indonesian dictator, Suharto, rode on a similar wave of authoritarian nostalgia (Muhtadi 2020). Once defeated, his successful opponent, Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo, appointed Prabowo Minister of Defence, positioning Prabowo for a third run at the presidency in 2024. A similar scenario could also play out in the Philippines. Sara Duterte-Carpio, Bongbong’s running mate, and daughter of the outgoing autocratic president, Rodrigo ‘Dingdong’ Duterte (aka ‘The Punisher’), was convincingly elected as vice president.<sup>3</sup> A deal between these two powerful dynastic families positions her to run for the presidency in 2028, while protecting her father from prosecution by the International Criminal Court for as many as 30,000 extra-judicial killings in his so-called war on drugs.

A plethora of terms explain the political evolution of Southeast Asia in the first decades of this century. These range from democratic ambivalence (Webb 2022) to democratic backsliding (Lorch 2021; Thompson 2021), democratic stagnation (Mietzner 2012) or democratic decline (Mietzner 2021a; Setiawan and Tomsa 2022) to, more worryingly, democratic deconsolidation (Mietzner 2021b) or an authoritarian turn (Noren-Nilsson 2021). Southeast Asian democracy can mutate into illiberal forms (Garrido 2021), patronage democracy (Aspinall 2019), or democratic majoritarianism (Abrams 2022) or even repressive pluralism (Fealy 2020), and authoritarian regimes may grow increasingly sophisticated (Morgenbesser 2021).

This somewhat depressing picture raises the question of the seemingly limited role of civil society in these trajectories (Arugay 2019). As Weiss and Hansson mention in their

introductory chapter, this handbook seeks to be a worthy successor to the seminal work of Muthiah Alagappa (2004) and his colleagues, who made a link between civil society and the enlarging and contracting of democratic space. The same year, another edited volume (Lee 2004) explored the institutional and other boundaries of that space in a series of case studies. This handbook incorporates both these approaches.

Almost 20 years later, this volume offers an important caveat with the warning in our introduction that ‘civil society is neither exclusively pro-democracy nor pro-human rights’. One of the most important contributions of this handbook is to explore in many chapters the existence of an ‘uncivil’ society (Beitinger-Lee 2010). Civil and, for that matter, uncivil society can be seen as an ‘imagined community’, to use Benedict Anderson’s (2006) much used (and abused) description of the nation. This is certainly appropriate for leaderless movements such as those protesting, or rioting, depending on one’s perspective, in the streets of Jakarta in May 1998 or in Yangon in February 2021. These ‘imagined communities’ may be transitory or even transnational, such as the so-called Milk Tea Alliance involving protestors initially in Hong Kong and Bangkok (Ponglamjiak 2021), and then Yangon and Mandalay (Stokke, this volume).

### **Domestic topographies**

The amorphous nature of civil society and its imagined character comes to the fore in this handbook, beginning with our first section, devoted to the spaces and platforms or vectors of/for civil society. The common theme throughout this handbook is that understanding, and defining, political space is crucial in any understanding of civil society behaviour (Hansson and Weiss 2018). For heuristic purposes, in my analytical grid, I have broken down the topography of the space for civil (and uncivil society) into three elements: the societal environment, the nature of states and regimes, and institutional frameworks such as legal systems, political party structures, and electoral systems.

### ***The societal environment***

Turning to the societal environment, let me begin with a subject that has seen the most ‘ink spilt’, or more factually, the greatest number of megabytes launched into cyberspace: the trajectory of the internet and social media in recent years. Merlyna Lim tackles this subject in our somewhat disturbing chapter (see Lim’s chapter, this volume). In the first decade of this century, the internet was seen as a liberating force, both in terms of empowerment at the local level, and in promoting democracy (Abbott, 2004; Hill and Sen 2005). Today, notwithstanding the importance of online political activism and advocacy, the internet and social media are also spaces for disinformation, hatred, and mobilisation for violence (Sinpeng and Tapsell 2020). In the Philippines, the Southeast Asian country with the highest level of social media use, the internet has become a tool for disinformation and the persecution of opponents. In short, while the technology may ostensibly be neutral, it provides a space both for civil and uncivil society. Moreover, through the efforts of paid and comprador regime bloggers, ‘vloggers’, influencers, and ‘trolls’, the boundaries between the space of civil society and that of the state/regime have become blurred.

Minna Valjakka (in this volume) presents contemporary arts as not only vectors to expand the space for civil society, but also spaces in themselves. In some parts of Southeast Asia, the arts seem to have been less impinged upon by regime and state actors. There, socially engaged artists can find themselves protected to a degree in the name of the

universal value of ‘artistic freedom’ or, more prosaically, because political elites perceive them as non-threatening. Yet, the cases of real or *de facto* one-party states in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam show the limits to tolerance, with heavy-handed censorship of art authorities deemed to be ‘harmful’. Myanmar’s crackdown since the coup of 1 February 2021, echoing previous periods of military rule, shows there is nothing permanent or inevitable about the artistic world’s being considered a neutral space in civil society (Hernandez 2022). Not only has the military junta physically targeted artists (including actors, poets, and rappers), but also poster art, for example, has become politicised and even uncivil (Nilsen 2022).

As the chapters in this volume by Buranajaroenkij, Rydström, Nguyễn, and Hoàng, and even Tans show, a societal environment is one framed in terms of belief and value systems, not only of a religious nature (Bonura’s chapter, this volume), but also incorporating vernacularised secular concerns (Bon and Wong’s chapter, this volume). While earlier literature on Islam in Indonesia in particular indicated its ‘civil’ nature (Hefner 2000; Freedman 2009), developments over the last two decades now highlight its potential uncivil possibilities (Hefner 2019; Chaplin 2021). This is due in part both to external influences and to the questioning of traditional religious authority (Saat and Burhani 2020) and mainstream Islamic organisations (Amin Abdullah 2020). A question requiring further research is the extent to which the fact that Indonesia’s two mass-membership bodies, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, occupy quasi-state functions in the provision of social welfare and education impinges on their legitimacy as civil society organisations.

A similar question could be raised as to the role of the Catholic Church in the Philippines: it also performs important quasi-state functions in education and social welfare. The Church was a major force in the People Power Revolution of 1986 (Cartagenas 2010) and still has a degree of moral authority, but this is being challenged by the rise of evangelical and other sects and churches. For example, the Iglesia Ni Cristo (Cornelio 2017) supported both Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 and Marcos, Jr. in 2022, contributing to their electoral victories and the Philippines’ democratic regression.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the two most populous Theravada Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia, Myanmar and Thailand, offer evidence also of both civil and uncivil behaviour by religious groups and organisations. Members of the sangha may have been at the forefront in 2007 of Myanmar’s Saffron Revolution demanding the end to military rule (Walton 2016), but the decade of political liberalisation also fostered the rise of militant Buddhism with a violent ethno-nationalist agenda, particularly directed against a Muslim minority. In southern Thailand, too, monks have taken up arms against a Malay-Muslim insurgency (Jerryson 2011). They have also mobilised support for the latest military coups and the ethnoreligious-nationalist-conservative authoritarian turn in Thailand generally over the last two decades (Connors and Pathmanand 2021). Even an ostensibly more pluralist religious environment such as that in a *Pancasila*-inspired Indonesia does not necessarily contribute, as might be expected, to a civil society space conducive to democracy (Formichi 2021).

### ***State/regime weakness or strength***

Andreas Ufen’s nuanced comparative study of political developments in Indonesia and Malaysia (Ufen’s chapter, this volume) underlines the need to examine state structures carefully. For him, they are determining factors in assessing the space for civil society. In

an earlier study, prior to the aborted ‘democratic transition’ in Myanmar, Rudland and Pederson (2000) similarly suggested that the then-military regime illustrated the case of a ‘strong regime functioning in a weak state’. The nature of the state, what Croissant and Hellman (2020) depict as ‘stateness’, is a crucial factor in determining the topography of civil society. In the Philippines also, a strong presidential regime obscures the existence of a weak state. On the contrary, Eugénie Mérieau (2016) has argued that, in the case of Thailand, a deep state perpetuates a mode of power, irrespective of the elected (or unelected) governments in place. The embeddedness of the Thai state limits the capacity of civil society to act through conventional NGO modalities (Phongpaichit 2021). The result is the emergence of somewhat leaderless protest movements whose declared objectives may ostensibly be those of political reform, but who are motivated by questioning of Thailand’s monarchical system and who challenge patriarchal social norms (Buranajaroenkij’s chapter, this volume; Sinpeng 2021). They also respond to an authoritarian civil society defending Thailand’s autocratic model (Sombatpoonsiri 2020).

Disenchantment with the role of civil society as a promoter of democratisation is linked to the Southeast Asian experience of a global phenomenon, the rise of populist regimes. In Indonesia, descriptions of populism under the presidency of Joko Widodo range from the oligarchic (Aspinall 2015), to technocratic (Mietzner 2015), to religiously violent (Barton et al. 2021). Scholars describe populism under Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte as penal (Curato 2016), punitive (Camroux 2022), or authoritarian. Presidential regimes, like those in Indonesia and the Philippines, are structurally particularly amenable to populist leaders. However, civil societies in parliamentary constitutional monarchies such as those in Thailand and Cambodia have also shown they are susceptible to populist appeals. Nevertheless the ‘supply’ side of populism needs to be examined in relation to the ‘demand’ side: in other words, a receptive civil society (or at least sections thereof) that exists in relation to a weak state.

### ***Institutional frameworks***

Advocacy groups, whether they militate over questions of urban land use (Padawangi’s chapter, this volume) or are involved in forms of legal mobilisation (Berenschot and Bedner’s chapter, this volume), intrinsically function in variable types of space. The definition of these spaces may be physical, as in the first case, or judicial, as in the second. In both cases, the boundaries in which they function are institutionally and politically determined. Moreover, a legal system that serves as a vector for advocacy can also be used to reduce the political space available to activists (Holmes 2022).

In such contexts, the question of leadership in civil society organisations is salient, as Astrid Norén-Nilsson demonstrates in this handbook. While the question comes to the fore in examining uncivil society (e.g., the leading role of the Mandalay-based Buddhist monk, Wirathu, in the Ma Ba Tha movement in Myanmar), it is often neglected in analysing ‘civil’ groups. In particular, leadership is of importance for organised labour, discussed by Teri Caraway in this volume, which operates within the boundaries state and regime establish. In her nuanced comparative analysis, Caraway shows how regimes can co-opt, or at least neutralise, labour organisations, limiting their space within civil society (see also Young 2021).

Andreas Ufen (in this volume), in line with work by co-editor Weiss (e.g., Weiss 2006; Aspinall and Weiss 2012; Weiss 2020), explores the relationship between political parties and civil society groups. Among other examples, he examines the success of the Bersih

(Clean) movement in bringing about political reform and the first change of governing coalition in Malaysia since independence. The victory of the Pakatan Harapan coalition seemed to suggest that a pro-democracy coalition of parties, supported by social movements, could pave the way for a transition through party politics. However, it was left to the new coalition in Parliament, headed by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, to confront structural issues such as the first-past-the-post voting system and gerrymandering. Intra- and inter-party rivalries and then defections saw the fall of Pakatan Harapan and the return of a reconfigured version of the previous governing coalition. Civil society activists in Malaysia found themselves to have limited resources to contest elite rivalries and defections in partisan politics.

The Thai case comes to the fore in several chapters in this handbook (especially those of Ufen and Buranajaroenkij), once again underlying the mutable space the symbiosis/dichotomy between civil society action and state/party systems generates. In Thailand, an ostensibly similar movement to Bersih, but of an authoritarian orientation – the People’s Alliance for Democracy – paved the way for the 2014 coup and the victory of pro-monarchist/conservative political parties in the 2019 elections, in a system structured in their favour (Sombatpoonsiri 2020). The Yellow Shirt movement ‘succeeded’ in bringing about democratic regression through its alliance with existing political parties. It then largely ceased to exist. During these elections, a newly constituted political party with significant support amongst urban youth, the Future Forward Party, became a key party in the opposition bloc. A politicised Thai Constitutional Court disqualified its leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, in November 2019 (Mérieau 2022), followed in February 2020 by the dissolution of the entire party. The party reconstituted itself as a progressive movement, nurturing youth and student activists who have continued to protest against the government of prime minister, and 2014 coup leader, General Prayut Chan-o-cha. An extra-parliamentary civil society opposition has sought to fill some of the void left by the incapacity of a conventional party-based political opposition. This situation has only partly been changed by Future Forward’s reorganisation as the Move Forward Party.

At the time of writing this process could be occurring in the Philippines. During the 2022 presidential election campaign there, the then-Vice President, Leni Robredo, despite being chairperson of the Liberal Party,<sup>5</sup> ran as an independent candidate, branding her campaign as a ‘people’s campaign’. She chose hot pink as the colour for her supporters as opposed to yellow associated with the Liberal Party since 1986 and the overthrow of Marcos, Jr. Her campaign relied on a large group of youth supporters, who conducted house-to-house canvassing, and her rallies were widely attended. Despite the enthusiasm generated, she received only 27.14% of the vote, compared to 58.77% for Marcos, Jr.

Following her defeat and declared withdrawal from political life, Robredo launched on 1<sup>st</sup> July the Angat Buhay NGO (Cepeda 2022), using the second part of her two-fold campaign slogan, *Gobyernong Tapat, Angat Buhay* (Honest Government, a Better Life for All). This is a revealing development. Basically, parliamentary opposition to the Marcos administration has been formally reduced to one senator in the 24-member Senate. Even in the context of the Philippine tradition of ‘turncoatism’ – or pursuing ‘pork’ by siding with the incumbent President – this is unique. As a result, resistance to a feared autocratic consolidation will need to occur outside the Filipino Congress. Yet, as John Nery (2022) has argued, it is hard to see how a civil society organisation like Robredo’s Angat Buhay, or even a reform-minded Catholic Church, could substitute for



an institutionalised political party. Parties, even ones such as those in the Philippines based on clans and patronage, can compete in elections; civil society organisations cannot. As argued throughout this handbook, once again, national institutional frameworks determine the space available to CSOs.

### **Transnational contours in ‘glocalised’ spaces**

It has been implicit throughout this volume that local/national civil societies seek space, not only within national borders (both physical and ideational) but to greatly varying degrees, also in a global or transnational environment. As the chapters in this handbook demonstrate the result is, in my view, evidence not so much of ‘globalisation’ but rather of ‘glocalisation’. ‘Glocalisation’ is a two-fold phenomenon involving a shift from the national upwards to the supra- or transnational or global, and downwards to subnational or local bodies (Swyngedouw 2004). For heuristic purposes, the global or transnational ‘horizons’, or boundaries engendering ‘glocalised’ spaces, can be divided into three types: the normative, the societal, and the systemic. Linking the three is a fourth transversal element, the economic.

### ***Normative factors***

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that Southeast Asia is the most inherently ‘glocalised’ region in the world. The rich historiography of the peoples of Southeast Asia (see for example, Lombard 1995; Harper 2020; Sidel 2021; Tagliacozzo 2022) concurs that they have been at the crossroads of global forces, including those of beliefs and values. The colonial interregnum was, perhaps, the most impactful period, at least in terms of shaping institutions and bringing the peoples of Southeast Asia into a global economy, but its importance needs to be understood relative to trajectories over the last 70 years or so. It is almost platitudinous to argue that ‘glocalisation’, like globalisation, is not only economic, but also social and ideational. Historically these currents of thought and organisational forms have been vernacularised and assimilated into local environments. The question then becomes not only *how* ideas spread but, also, *which* global norms matter (Acharya 2004), and how then they become localised, or ‘glocalised’ as Southeast Asian. This handbook addresses in a holistic way three subjects that profoundly concern civil society: religion, gender, and the environment. These three subjects that touch on the human condition are both terribly local and also incredibly universal.

In this volume, Duanghathai Buranajaroenkij addresses the question of gender advancement. Although her case study is limited to Thailand, a number of her conclusions could be applied to neighbouring Southeast Asian countries where women are also largely excluded from formal political establishments. The caveats she applies are also salient elsewhere: some of the most prominent female politicians are the daughters of emblematic deceased politicians (Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in the Philippines), the widows of male politicians (the late Cory Aquino and Leni Robredo in the Philippines), or standing in for exiled or imprisoned brothers or husbands (Yingluck Shinawatra in Thailand, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in Malaysia).<sup>6</sup> Given the boundaries for entry into the institutionalised political sphere, Duanghathai argues, civil society provides a space to advance gender issues.

Southeast Asian countries have a long history of women's organisations whose norms initially confined women to traditional subservient roles. However, as early as during anti-colonial struggles in both Indonesia and Vietnam, women challenged gender stereotypes with some long-lasting consequences. In recent decades, economic empowerment and educational advances at the local level have impacted on evolving norms and expectations. It is fiendishly difficult to make a distinction between what normative change is domestically driven and what is a result of a changing global environment. Nevertheless, it could be argued that Western feminist thought has had an impact in Southeast Asian civil society; perhaps the #metoo movement also resonates, especially in the milieu of the urban middle class. At the same time, a group such as Sisters in Islam in Malaysia specifically seeks to ground its feminism outside of Western thought.

Moreover, the regional environment institutionalised in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has widened the space to advance gender issues – including sexuality and gender-identity rights advocacy (Weiss 2021) – throughout Southeast Asia. The 2008 ASEAN Declaration of Human Rights, based on that of the United Nations, is gender-neutral in its terminology. The ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organisations is an accredited civil society organisation to the ASEAN Secretariat. A conducive regional environment is also reinforced by a global environment involving both norms and financing. For example, enhancing educational opportunities for girls and empowering women economically are considered apolitical by Southeast Asian regimes enlarging the space, not only for local NGOs, but also for international NGOs (INGOs). Foreign aid donors can and do impose gender-advancement conditionalities on their foreign direct investment (FDI). For instance, the European Union not only includes gender conditionalities in its aid, but such conditions are also part of the trade agreements it has signed, or is in the process of signing, with Southeast Asian countries. This is not the case for another area that overlaps with questions of gender, that of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights.

Rydström, Nguyen, and Hoang address LGBT rights in Vietnam in this volume. They examine the success of civil society not only in opening space for advocacy but also in changing perceptions of LGBT individuals as 'social evil' to being seen as 'human beings' (see also Pham 2022). Ostensibly there is, in this case, a clear import of at least forms of advocacy from the West: the replication of the Gay Pride marches that began in New York over 50 years ago. Yet while some forms of protest and celebration may suggest the adoption of global norms, this does not explain the reception of these norms. In some cases, a conducive local environment with a degree of cultural acceptance of homosexuality has enlarged the civil society space for LGBT advocacy. Nevertheless, this does not explain why an authoritarian regime such as Vietnam's tolerates such advocacy. I would argue that the regime sees it as 'apolitical' and unthreatening, as in many secularised countries of the world. Moreover, regime tolerance for the LGBT movement wins approval at little cost from Western partners allowing for the 'pinkwashing' of intolerance of other social movements.<sup>7</sup>

In their glocalised dimension, environmental issues involve also an element of a regime pandering to the international community, i.e. 'greenwashing'. More profoundly, as Oliver Pye discusses in this volume, environmental CSOs function in a normative space determined by adherence to the notion of sustainable development. This normative framework is global, local, and regional at the same time: the promotion of 'sustainable development so as to protect the region's environment' is the 9th of the 15th purposes ASEAN designates in its 2008 Charter (Moon 2016, 51). 'Sustainable development', like

its more recent mutation, the ‘fight against climate change’, is perhaps the most glocal of concepts, being applicable at the local and global level at the same time. Concretely, governments in Southeast Asia pay at least lip service to the concept, thus, theoretically, opening space for environmental CSOs to function.

In practice, the width and depth of this space remains determined by the nature of regimes, with flawed democracies like the Philippines and Indonesia offering more possibilities for advocacy than a one-party state like Vietnam. The ‘ecological Leninism’ of the Vietnamese Communist Party, to use David Hutt’s (2022) ironic terminology, seeks to encourage a civil society concern with the environment, but under Party leadership. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, when CSOs are conservationist, for example, in saving the cute Asian elephant or the cuddly orangutan from extinction, they enter literally into a conservative space and one deemed as apolitical or unthreatening to the state. They also garner international approval. However, as Pye (in this volume) notes, when advocacy CSOs ‘trespass’ (no pun intended) into the space of land and property rights, and/or denounce the environmental degradation frenetic neo-liberal development causes, they enter into more contentious terrain. Yet questions of environmental degradation are also regional. For example, the periodic forest fires resulting from illegal logging in Indonesia cause a pall of life-threatening haze that spreads to Singapore and Malaysia. This diffusion not only calls into question the non-interference/respect-for-sovereignty principle of an inter-governmental organisation such as ASEAN, but it also opens space for transnational advocacy among ASEAN NGOs.

While environmental action is a subject that crosses physical borders, the religious worlds of Southeast Asia have also historically known no borders. There is a fundamental tension between the great religious traditions’ claims to universality, and the extent to which civil societies adhering to those traditions organise locally or at best, nationally. Today this situation is even more paradoxical given the transnational flows of ideas and norms especially in Islam and Christianity. In this volume, Carlo Bonura posits a reason for this paradox: historically, religious groups in civil society have been important in promoting nationalist political, not religious, agendas. During the colonial period, this meant the crucial place of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association in the struggle against British colonial rule in Burma echoed a similar role for Muslim groups against Dutch colonial rule in what is today’s Indonesia.

More recently, as mentioned above, the Catholic Church was crucial in ending the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 and re-establishing democracy. Buddhist groups in both Myanmar and in Thailand have alternatively been advocates of democracy and also of autocratic rule. Vietnam, at least since unification in 1975, is the exception where religious groups abstain – or are forced to abstain – from activity of an overtly political nature. This is despite the fact that important sections and leading personalities of the current pro-democracy movement in Vietnam are clearly connected to various religious groups: Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist. Some of them even started their pro-democracy engagement as part of a struggle for religious freedom after 1975 (Hansson in press). Vietnam’s exceptionalism can perhaps be explained by the fact that Communist state officially recognises the largest number of religious organisations, in a country where officially only a quarter of the population claims a religious affiliation. Nevertheless, in all these cases, the nature of the state and regime is a determining factor in the space available to a religiously oriented civil society.

Glocalisation, as I have argued above, has been for centuries in the ‘DNA’ of religious practice in Southeast Asia. It can be seen in examples ranging from the syncretic nature

of Javanese Islam, to the synthesis of Catholicism and folk religions in many parts of the Philippines, to the adoption of Western intellectual discourse in the Theravada Buddhism of Thailand. An even more inter-connected world of the last few decades has provided even greater opportunity for these flows of ideas, with the effect of enlarging the space for both civil and uncivil society. The diffusion of norms and ideas has been facilitated also by transnational structures, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, founded in 1969 as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which has provided Indonesian and Malaysian governments with an important platform (Alles 2016). The role of UN bodies in organising dialogues between religions – and for religious freedom – also serves to diffuse global norms that enter into the discourse, not just of governments, but also of civil society (Alles 2021). At the regional level, Article 22 of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration sets ‘freedom of conscience, thought and religion’ as a fundamental principle (Moon 2016, 47). While there are no effective mechanisms to ensure compliance with this principle, which few Southeast Asian countries respect, at least a benchmark has been established.

As Carlo Bonura (in this volume) demonstrates, there is no one single position along the global/local continuum for religion in Southeast Asian civil society. In Indonesia, the two major mass organisations extolling a civil Islam are indeed very local. But they also speak a universal language of religious tolerance while supporting Indonesia’s nationalist and secular Pancasila ideology. Even more liberalising tendencies in civil society appear to be locally driven. For example, the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI), an instrument of Vice President and later President Habibie in the 1990s, was designed to be a nationalist vehicle of moderation. Liberalisation after *Reformasi* saw the growth of liberal Islamic associations, such as the online-based Liberal Islam Network, seeking to root a liberal Islam locally, while making it more cosmopolitan. At the same time, uncivil Islamist groups, such as the banned Front Pembela Islam and Hizbut Tahrir and the violent Jemaah Islamiyah, are expressions of a global Salafist wave localised in Indonesia (Chaplin 2021).

The Theravada Buddhism of Southeast Asia is, in theory, less susceptible to global influences: after all, being Burmese or Thai is defined, in part, as being Buddhist, whether of the Theravada or Mahayana tradition. However, contemporary Buddhism enjoys a global respectability embodied in the person of the Dalai Lama as a moral leader, which reflects back in Southeast Asia. Burmese Buddhism in its uncivil form, such as that of the Ma Ba Tha, draws on the Islamophobic conspiracy theory of the great replacement popularised in parts of the West.

As for the Philippines branch of the Catholic Church: by its very nature, it is a participant in the trajectory of Catholicism worldwide and the liberalising developments of recent decades. In the Philippines, the Church is challenged by the worldwide rise of Pentecostalism and the ‘prosperity gospel’. In reaction, the Filipino Catholic hierarchy has fostered *within the Church itself* a charismatic movement, El Shaddai (Wiegele 2005), led by real-estate developer Mike Velarde. El Shaddai and charismatic Protestant groups may draw their inspiration from the United States, and through the involvement of the Filipino diaspora, they are by nature global, yet their messages and actions are localised within the Philippines. In 2008, Christl Kessler and Jürgen Rüländ raised the question of whether this populist religiosity would contribute to widening the space of Philippines’ civil society in favour of democracy. What it has done is to foster a local variant of the Trumpian illiberal democratic wave, in the process glocalising many of its themes.

### ***Societal contours***

In this volume, Stephen Rother's analysis of advocacy for migrant rights highlights the national/transnational space occupied by diasporas, particularly that of overseas Filipino workers. The almost 10% of the Filipino population who live overseas are a powerful economic force: their remittances provide 10%–15% of Gross domestic product (GDP) and they constitute a political force Filipino politicians fervently court (see Aguilar 2014). Aided by social media, the internet, and other forms of communication, the Filipino diaspora can arguably live in two worlds of civil society at the same time. The question is whether they occupy an extra-territorial space in civil society promoting democracy. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Filipino diaspora in the United States provided a haven for opposition to the Marcos dictatorship, with Benigno Aquino himself being exiled there. However, in the presidential elections of 2016 and 2022, the majority of Filipinos overseas supported, respectively, Rodrigo Duterte and 'Bongbong' Marcos, aware of their autocratic demeanour.

The case of the Burmese (Myanmar) diaspora provides a further example. After the repression of 1988, Burmese overseas constituted a crucial part of the opposition to the military dictatorship. They certainly were instrumental in maintaining Western sanctions and keeping the situation in Myanmar 'on the radar screen' in Western media. This came to the fore during the Saffron Revolution of 2007, when, aided by new technologies, foreign audiences could see the military repression in Myanmar in real time. In the period from 2011 to 2021, the diaspora provided support for NGOs in Myanmar itself, as well as for Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. After the coup of February 2021, the Burmese diaspora, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, but also in some EU countries, finds itself once again creating a space for extra-territorial opposition to the military junta. However, thanks to advanced communication technologies, this renewed space also brings Burmese worldwide closer to a challenger National Unity Government (NUG). Not only are several NUG ministers physically in exile outside Myanmar but also local diasporic Burmese communities support the NUG's parallel foreign ministry.

Overall, the Vietnamese Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) are an important source of both financial transfers, and, increasingly, expertise for the Vietnamese single-party-controlled capitalist economy. In my personal experience, I have noticed that the acrimonious divisions prior to unification in 1975 have faded over time and Vietnamese diasporic millennials and especially members of Generation X cultivate a kind of long-distance patriotism. Chinese assertiveness in the East/South China Sea provides a handy cause for this nationalist convergence. In the process, a space has been opened for diasporic civil society activity – one connected locally in Vietnam itself – as long as it carries a patriotic tinge.

That said, not all such diasporic activist connections orient in this way. In their chapter devoted to LGBT activism in Vietnam, Rydström and her colleagues raise the case of a Vietnamese expatriate in Singapore who is a leading figure in the Vietnamese LGBT movement. The religious sphere touched upon by Bonura in this volume is also one where the Vietnamese diaspora, as a form of extra-territorial civil society, lives a wider space outside the country (Hoskins and Ninh 2017). However, their linkages to co-religionists in Vietnam itself also enlarge the space for the latter in the 'homeland'.

### **Systemic factors**

As the authors in this handbook allude to on various occasions, both civil (and uncivil) societies function, not only in domestic and global contexts, but also in a *structured* regional context. Following the end of the Sukarno-inspired *Konfrontasi* between Indonesia and its neighbours, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was founded in 1967, during the Cold War, with five members. It expanded between 1995 and 1998, after the end of the Cold War, to now include ten countries of Southeast Asia<sup>8</sup> and has been successful as a security community in avoiding war in the region (Acharya 2021). Once again there is a ‘glocalised’ phenomenon at play: in terms of norms and nomenclature, there is a deal of replication with the European Union (Jetschke and Murray 2011). This norm diffusion is reinforced by the fact that the EU–ASEAN (now strategic) partnership is the oldest inter-regional relationship worldwide, dating from 1972.

The existence of this regional organisation is a double-edged sword for domestic civil societies. On the one hand, like all international organisations (Meyerrose 2020), ASEAN as an *inter-governmental* body strengthens the power and legitimacy of executives, irrespective of whether they are democratically elected or not. As Anders Uhlin (in this volume) and Alice Ba (2013) underline, the legitimacy aspect is of particular salience. However, ASEAN also provides a number of other benefits for member governments. These range from a more pronounced presence on the international scene, making ASEAN, in theory at least, ‘central’ to regionalisation in the Asia-Pacific, and easier access to international financing. ASEAN also provides a shield against criticism of the internal affairs of its members, given the sacrosanct principles of respect for sovereignty and non-interference (Ba 2009; Camroux 2020). This has, in consequence, diminished the space for civil society action.

On the other hand, the ASEAN Charter, which all ten members ratified in 2008, gave ASEAN a legal personality. Article 1.13 declares that the aim of the Association is ‘to promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community building’ (Moon 2016, 55) As Anders Uhlin (in this volume)<sup>9</sup> and Kelly Gerard (2014) have argued, this people-oriented thrust, in theory, should open up space for civil society. In theory, also, regional frameworks for civil society action present the possibility of intra-regional alliances or networks and, thus, enlarge the space for civil society action beyond the nation state (Parthenay 2019).

In his chapter, Anders Uhlin lists long-standing regional civil society networks, many of which are human-rights advocacy organisations. This focus is understandable given that the 7th of the ASEAN Charter’s 15 purposes (and also one of the Association’s 14 principles) is to ‘strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms’ (Moon 2016, 45–48, 63–69). In Southeast Asia, the vernacularisation of human-rights discourse occurs through the filter of ASEAN and ASEAN-related bodies, as Bon and Wong (in this volume) argue, with reference both to local and international norms (Allison and Taylor 2017).

In 2009, a year after the ratification of the ASEAN Charter, an ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) was established, to which each of the ten member governments appoints a representative for a three-year term (Tan 2011). The AICHR is a consultative body with no compliance mechanisms, whose purpose is to promote and protect human rights. It is widely criticised as ‘toothless’

or as an exercise, as Uhlin argues in his chapter, in legitimising ASEAN as a multi-lateral organisation. Worse still, for some observers, the AICHR provides a form of whitewashing of its members' domestic human-rights records, as do other associated bodies such as the ASEAN Civil Society Forum (Nandyatama 2021). Collins and Bon (2021) offer more positive assessment, arguing that the AICHR provides a participatory space for civil society groups; Duxbury and Tan (2019), too, see it as a work in progress.

At the least, this body, and other intra-regional bodies, provides a space to create intra-regional solidarities among civil society groups and, importantly, to normalise criticism of situations outside the physical borders of a member state. These practices can be further strengthened in inter-regional contexts such as the People's Forums that accompany biannual Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) summits (Gilson 2011). In a wider ASEAN-related context, organisations such as the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), based in Singapore, also support a degree of continuity in exchanges between Asian and European CSOs. These exchanges tend to favour the Southeast Asian members, strengthening their legitimacy and expanding their space for action locally. Importantly, they also open the door to transnational financing.

### *Financing*

In noting the role of ASEF, I have touched upon the essential issue of financing and its impact on the space for civil society. Rosalia Sciortino (in this volume) demonstrates its salience for the space available for CSOs and the extent to which they are at the mercy of trends in multilateral funding.<sup>10</sup> Sciortino provides the example of Myanmar during the period of military rule, when what Western funding existed was for humanitarian purposes and channelled through CSOs. INGOs saw strengthening civil society as a way also to foster democratisation (BCN and TNI 1999). The hybrid-regime period (2011–2021), especially after the first democratic elections in 2015, saw a shift to funding through strengthening political institutions (Clapp 2016), which proved inadequate for the task (Strefford 2020). Since the coup, there has been a return to the status quo ante of financing local NGOs for humanitarian purposes. In other words, evolving domestic (local) boundaries between state/regime and civil society impinge on the international (global) contours of the financial space for CSOs.

As Sciortino argues, international donors have been reshaping their aid for a much stronger state-centric approach; that shift has been accompanied by Southeast Asian governments' strengthening their control of funding for CSOs. In the absence of increased philanthropy from local and international sources, multilateral funding tends to be directed to areas which are considered apolitical, especially economic development. Donors tend to channel funds through state or quasi-state agencies. Decentralised forms of assistance, like those of the German political foundations (Mohr 2010), or, in the experience of this author, of various French institutes and city-to-city cooperation schemes, do provide at least indirect financial support for CSOs. Various foreign cultural institutes can also provide physical space.

At the regional level in Southeast Asia, examining the less-than-transparent budget of the ASEAN Secretariat (estimated at US\$300 million in 2012), Sandra Destradi (2020) emphasises ASEAN's own reliance on external financing. The main external donors are the EU and Japan, with support also from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Germany. For example, the EU spent €250 million for cooperation with ASEAN between 2016 and 2020 and another €2 billion on bilateral assistance (EEAS website).

Engel and Mattheis (2020) estimate that in 2016 the ratio between donor and member contributions was 94 to 6, the highest of any regional organisation in the global south. Yet as ASEAN is an inter-governmental organisation, it is governments that determine the allocation of funding for civil society groups.

### **New questions: civil and uncivil society and the (un?)civil war in Myanmar**

Myanmar was meant to be the ‘good news story’ of this decade for demonstrating the inevitability of democratisation. Yet, despite mostly free and fair multi-party elections, like those in 2015 and 2020, analysts described Myanmar as having a hybrid (Stokke and Aung 2020) or tutelary (Bünthe 2021) regime and being a ‘caretaker democracy’ (Egretreau 2016) from 2011 to 2021. Nevertheless, during this period, as political space had opened up, some civil society activists entered parliament. Most ran under the National League for Democracy, but some, under ethnic parties. These former Myanmar civil society activists thus joined the distinctly undemocratic military officers who constituted a quarter of members of parliament. Both groups had to learn how to become lawmakers (Egretreau 2022).

With the coup d’état of 1 February 2021, Myanmar returned to military rule. After less than a month of tolerating peaceful protest, the military junta began a campaign of increasing repression leading to a descent into civil war,<sup>11</sup> a war whose results remain at this point inconclusive.

Yet the imponderables in this situation are not only military, but they also are social and political. In particular, they raise issues regarding civil society, and, as Joakim Kreutz (in this volume) argues, the space available to it. The same issues were being asked some ten years ago (Henry 2011). The coup and the repression of the military junta (with the Orwellian name, the State Administration Council) have both reduced and expanded the space for civil and uncivil society. On the one hand, with many NGOs now disbanded, in exile or functioning on reduced funding, the space for *structured* civil society groups, especially of an advocacy nature, has been reduced. As a consequence, activists have resorted to cyberspace as a space of contention (Ryan and Tran 2022). On the other, an amorphous Civil Disobedience Movement has emerged to challenge the junta and to take over functions such as health care and education the Myanmar state previously performed (Ostwald and Hlaing 2021). Moreover, in areas not controlled by the military, civil society groups have themselves taken on state administrative functions. In some areas, the space for civil society has thus been enlarged, albeit in dire circumstances. It is not unreasonable to argue that Myanmar is now in a revolutionary situation (Jordt et al. 2021), raising further questions about the space for civil society.

As a result, as Kristian Stokke shows in this volume, the relationship between the majority Bamar civil society and that of the ethnic minorities is being transformed (see also Thawngmung and Khun Noah 2021) in ways that strike at the notion of who is civil (i.e. citizens) in a given nation (Bertrand 2021). Ambitions for a federal democracy that will include the previously excluded, such as the Rohingya, within its borders have implications for the space for civil society (Htet Min Lwin 2021). As the opposition to the junta seeks to develop a united front, the space for ethnic groups and minorities Jacques Bertrand and Cheng Xu describe in this volume of this handbook has become enlarged to encompass their civil and uncivil elements. On the contrary, the space in Myanmar for business associations such as those Ryan Tans describes (in this volume) has been significantly reduced because of the economic sanctions imposed



on the military regime, the withdrawal of foreign investment, and the ascendancy of military-controlled conglomerates.

On a more conceptual level, one could ask: does a civil war situation call into question the distinction between civil and uncivil society? In ethnic-minority areas, some local NGOs, for self-protection, have become even closer to ethnic armed organisations. In Bamar-majority areas, anti-junta armed groups, known as People's Defence Forces (PDFs), have emerged with differing levels of allegiance to the NUG. The NUG, in exile both physically and virtually (Saengkrai 2021), was constituted from the majority elected in the November 2020 elections. It declared a 'defensive war' against the junta on 7 September 2021, legitimising the resort to armed resistance (ICG 2021). While, for the military junta, PDFs and ethnic armed organisations are 'terrorist groups', they can be seen as civil or uncivil society organisations, given their resort to what they would argue are legitimate forms of coercion and violence. The question is pertinent given that their uncivil action is being conducted within the boundaries of a space determined by a rival quasi-'state' authority, the NUG.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

It may appear a little unfair to my fellow authors to have rounded off this state-of-the-art handbook with a series of questions. But that is indeed the point. For, as noted in the introductory chapter, the study of civil society is in its infancy. Southeast Asia – with its extraordinary diversity in terms of ethnicity, class, religion, regime type, state structure, diasporas, etc. – will continue to provide a rich and fascinating object of study. At the crossroads of the invention and diffusion of norms, influences, and practices, a globalised Southeast Asia will continue to be at the forefront of developments in civil and uncivil society worldwide.

## Notes

- 1 I use Roudometof's definition of 'glocalization': 'the refraction of globalizations through the local. The result is glocality – a blend of the local and the global' (2016a, 403; further developed in 2016b).
- 2 It is important to highlight the use of the term 'people' as an adjective and not in the possessive form, as if the 'power' were intrinsically the 'people's' whether 'they' were present or not. It is highly questionable, also, to use the term 'revolution' given that the result was a change of elite and the maintenance of the presidential regime (Claudio 2013).
- 3 Indonesia limits presidents to two terms of five years, and the Philippines, to one term of six years. Another peculiarity of the Philippines' system is that the president and vice president are elected separately. During the Duterte presidency, his Vice President, Leni Robredo, was the leader of the opposition.
- 4 In 2010, however, the INC backed Liberal Party candidate Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino III.
- 5 The online campaign against those opposed to Duterte, loosely linked to the Liberal Party and thus dubbed as 'yellowtards', discredited the party and its campaign colour (yellow). In 1986, Cory Aquino's wearing of yellow as the standard bearer for the Liberal Party was a symbolic act of defiance.
- 6 In the Philippines, the predominance of political dynasties – from which for example, two-thirds of members of Congress hail – provides cases of male politicians, such as 'Noynoy' Aquino and 'Bongbong' Marcos, who benefit from that same familial status. But the phenomenon extends beyond such heavily dynastic polities, as with Singapore's Lee Hsien Loong or Malaysia's Najib Razak.
- 7 I remember a conversation with a then-EU ambassador in Vietnam in 2018 who declared: 'When we criticize officials for human rights abuses in the country, they reply: look, on gay rights we are more advanced than a number of European countries'.

- 8 Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka), where the British had based their South East Asia Command during World War II, was in 1967 slated as a possible member, although this was never pursued. Today, Timor-Leste, independent since 1999, has its membership pending.
- 9 Uhlin (2016) also addresses civil society interactions with the Asian Development Bank. Future research might examine how Southeast Asian CSOs interact – or not – with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank founded in 2016.
- 10 I remember the joke in Jakarta in 2000 shortly after the Reformasi movement led to the fall of President Suharto, about creating one-member NGOs to obtain foreign funds.
- 11 So far, there has been little study of civil society in a civil war context, other than Henry (2011) and Barter (2014).
- 12 Previously in Myanmar, the ethno-nationalist Ma Ba Tha movement had justified the use of violence against Muslims as necessary to 'defend Buddhism', by reference to a higher authority.

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