Democracy and Participatory Regionalism in Southeast Asia

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Nearly a decade ago, in an article published in Third World Quarterly (vol.24, no.3, 2003), I proposed the idea of participatory regionalism as an evolving alternative to the official and patrimonial regionalism of Southeast Asia represented by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). I conceptualized it in the following manner:

The term “participatory regionalism”...is distinguished by two key features. The first, at the level of official regionalism, is the acceptance by governments of a more relaxed view of state sovereignty and the attendant norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. This allows for more open discussion of, and action on, problems facing a region and creates more space for non-governmental actors in the decision-making process. A second feature of participatory regionalism is the development of a close nexus between governments and the civil society in managing regional and transnational issues. This means not just greater cooperation among the social movements leading to the emergence of a regional civil society, but also closer and positive interaction between the latter and the official regionalism of states.

Today, I want to revisit the concept and see to what extent the two key elements of participatory regionalism have or have not progressed.

Regionalism in Southeast Asia has been traditionally state-centric. ASEAN was born and in many ways remains a club of elites. It’s origins was mainly due to a shared concern for regime survival among a group of Southeast Asian rulers facing myriad internal challenges to their authority, including communism, separatism and demands for political openness. It gave little space to national and regional civil society actors. Patrimonial regionalism had manifested itself in a number of ways, including, but not limited to the following:

1. Support for authoritarian rule through a policy of non-interference, which involved, first and foremost, refusal to
criticize military takeovers or military control over civilians, suppression of political freedom, or human rights abuses, in member countries, including Suharto’s Indonesia.

2. Support for the military regime in Burma through a policy termed as “constructive engagement”. In reality, it meant tolerance for Burma’s dictators and refusing to endorse sanctions against the regime. There was very little engagement, at least until the early 2000s, on ASEAN’s part to persuade the regime to change it ways;

3. Almost total exclusion of civil society groups from ASEAN’s activities. Such groups were never consulted before major ASEAN initiatives were adopted and they had no role in their implementation.

4. A unified stand of cultural relativism with respect to human rights and democracy. For example, ASEAN countries met with other leaders from Asia in Bangkok in 1992 just before the Vienna UN Conference on Human Rights to demand that the idea of universal human rights should be contingent upon the specific socio-economic and historical conditions of states, and that political rights or civil liberties should not get precedence over economic rights, or right to development.

Yet, this patrimonial regionalism of ASEAN came to be challenged in the past two decades. These challenges have been both external and internal, but mainly the latter.

Externally, patrimonial regionalism, especially the non-interference principle, was challenged by the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. This crisis exposed ASEAN’s incapacity to deal with transnational shocks. It led to a call for more intrusive regional interactions, exemplified in then Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s notion of “constructive intervention”. After Anwar’s downfall, Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan took up the challenge with his more nuanced vision of “flexible engagement”. In Surin’s view, when domestic developments threaten the peace and well-being of the region, ASEAN must not sit idle, but engage in discussions and solutions even if this involves criticizing each other’s domestic politics and policies.

Internally, the prospect for participatory regionalism has been intimately linked to democratization in Southeast Asia. Thus, the collapse of the Suharto regime, itself brought about by the Asian financial crisis, triggered a fundamental change in Indonesia’s attitude towards democracy and human rights. Jakarta actively sought to enshrine democracy and human rights in the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Political-Security Community. Its legislators called for a more hardline stand against the military regime in Burma, Indonesia also supported demands for political liberalization in Malaysia under Mahathir and his successors, in a clear violation of ASEAN’s non-interference principles.

A third and closely related development was the empowerment of civil society groups in Southeast Asia’s more open polities, including
Indonesia, Thailand (with interruptions) and Philippines. Malaysia too developed a very active civil society campaigning mainly on domestic issues, but with transnational interests and linkages.

Has the prospect for participatory regionalism in Southeast Asia been significantly advanced then? On the positive side, let me highlight the following:

1. The emergence of regional networks with the goal of influencing the agenda of ASEAN. This includes the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA), which held its first meeting in 2000. This was a meeting of civil society groups and a group of government-linked ASEAN think-tanks, the ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS). Its agenda has far from radical, and although it did attract some participation for governments, the level of official engagement and empathy was minimal. Nonetheless, it was the first break from ASEAN’s stringent avoidance of contact with civil society groups.

2. The decision by the Eminent Persons’ Group on the ASEAN Charter, comprising both active and retired officials from ASEAN members, to consult with civil society groups representing various sectors, including agriculture, labour and human rights NGOs. Although the EPG’s recommendations for civil society participation were modest and its overall vision for a more open and institutionalized and rule-based ASEAN were diluted by the strictly intergovernmental committee that drafted the final text of the charter, it nonetheless created a precedent for public consultations that was unprecedented in the history of ASEAN.

3. The establishment of the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights. The idea of such a commission dates back to 1992, and it was a provision of the ASEAN Charter. The mandate and powers terms of reference of the Commission are quite limited in scope. Its mandate is “promotion”, rather than “protection” of human rights. But its creation sparked another round of activism by Southeast Asian NGOs, led by a new network called Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA). This group would articulate and galvanize civil society pressure during the debate over the ASEAN Charter and the making of the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights. While these efforts were not very consequential, the very fact that they were made and found their way into the general public debate over ASEAN’s purpose and role is not trivial.

4. The explicit enshrining of democracy and human rights in the ASEAN Charter and the blueprint for an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. This is one of the three communities of ASEAN, the other two being the ASEAN Economic Community and the aforementioned ASEAN Political-Security Community. The Socio-Cultural Community is anchored on the concept of a “People’s ASEAN”, and calls for greater engagement with the civil society in Southeast Asia.
5. In the area of economic, especially financial cooperation, AESAN has accepted the principle of peer review and macroeconomic surveillance. AESAN has also developed new cooperative mechanisms to deal with a host of transnational issues, including pandemics, natural disasters and terrorism. These have been induced by real regional contingencies such as the SARS crisis in 2003, the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 and Cyclone Nargis in Burma, and the Bali bombings in 2001 and 2002.

6. Last but not the least, there was ASEAN’s growing frustration with the regime in Burma. While publicly ASEAN continued a hands off approach to political developments in Burma, including the Burmese regime’s drafting of a constitution that was widely condemned as illegitimate and as a device to perpetuate military control over politics, the grouping was much less unwilling than before to discuss Burma’s internal situation and show its impatience over the lack of progress in political reform there. A highlight of this shift was ASEAN’s public and strongly-worded condemnation, at the United Nations in New York, of the Burmese regime’s brutal suppression of the Saffron uprising in 2008.

The recent signs of a political opening in Burma have prompted some in ASEAN to claim vindication of the constructive engagement approach. But this claim cannot hold. There is little evidence that ASEAN’s approach of non-interference or genteel pressure brought about the change in Burma. What is really driving the initial sparks of change in Burma is a combination of factors, including the growing anti-Chinese sentiment in country brought about by its heavy dependence on Chinese aid and large-scale economic presence, the desire among some younger elites for an end to sanctions which were hurting them, Aung San Suu Kyi’s willingness to deal with the regime, and the US encouragement, at the urging of Suu Kyi herself, of the reformist policies of the new government in Naypyidaw. Yet, if the regime continue on its path of liberalization, ASEAN would have an important and helpful role. It can provide the reform-minded regime in Burma a platform to seek international legitimacy, end its isolation and secure economic support, which may further strengthen the hands of pro-reform forces within the country.

Has regionalism in Southeast Asia made sufficient transition from being a “club of elites” to a “people’s ASEAN”? Clearly, there has been some change, mostly induced by the Asian financial crisis and democratic change in Indonesia. The fixation with absolute Westphalian sovereignty has been diluted somewhat. But full realization of participatory regionalism remains elusive. Let me offer the following reasons.

First, democratisation in ASEAN remains uneven and fragile. Even in Indonesia, despite successful direct presidential elections, one cannot take the democratization process as irreversible. The recent Thai experience warrants caution, even a bit of skepticism that democratization in Southeast Asia is a linear process. Cambodia, the
incoming Chair of ASEAN, is increasingly intolerant of civil society activism. Vietnam, a large and influential ASEAN member, is hostile. The recent elections in Singapore signals a limited opening up of the polity to civil society autonomy, although the setback delivered to the ruling party there may be more due to the people’s desire for greater humility and accountability from their government, rather than democracy and human rights.

Second, in most Southeast Asian countries, the civil society itself, even in the countries where it enjoys reasonable political space, remains nationally focused. When it seeks external economic and political support, it is usually from the West, rather than from neighbouring countries. In other words, the regional layer of civil society, one that operates between national and global levels, is rather thin. And the incentives and resources to develop a more robust regional civil society is lacking in the region.

Third, some of the new institutions created by ASEAN may constrain the growth of participatory regionalism. It has been argued that the ASEAN Charter has recommitted the members, this time in a fundamental, constitutional way, to the principle of respect for sovereignty. The ASEAN Secretariat has little mandate and capacity for engaging civil society organizations. The efforts by the current Secretary General, Surin Pitsuwan, to develop a networked secretariat that would have involved great civil society participation, has been met with resistance from official representatives of member states to ASEAN, called the Committee on Permanent Representatives (CPR). This new institution is opposing an autonomous role for the secretariat and the secretary general.

Finally, the rise of China and its growing influence in the region is another constraining factor behind participatory regionalism. A country whose own domestic civil society is heavily muzzled by the regime, China is increasingly an influential dialogue partner of ASEAN and a leader of the wider East Asian regionalism. It is therefore unlikely to tolerate or support the growth of a regional civil society in East Asia which might encourage democratization in the region and thus pose a threat to its own regime survival.

To conclude, while progress has been made in opening up Southeast Asia’s official and elite-centric regionalism, and the outlook for the future is not all bleak, it is too early to think of regionalism in Southeast Asia or East Asia as a bottom-up construction. The realization of participatory regionalism in Southeast Asia would therefore require further democratization in the region.