Democratisation and the prospects for participatory regionalism in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT  This article explores the impact of democratic transitions in Southeast Asia on regional co-operation, and the relationship between this process and the development of a non-official regionalism. Until now, regionalism in Southeast Asia has been essentially elite-centred and politically illiberal. The emergence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was founded upon the common desire of its members, which had by then retreated significantly from their postcolonial experiments in liberal democracy, to ensure regime survival. This orientation was further institutionalised by ASEAN’s doctrine of non-interference, which helped to shield its members from outside pressures towards democratisation. But with democratisation in the Philippines, Thailand and more recently Indonesia, the ASEAN model of elite-centric regional socialisation has been challenged. The civil society in the region demands greater openness in Southeast Asian regionalism. The article proposes a conceptual framework for analysing the relationship between democratisation and regionalism, with the key argument being that the displacement of traditional patterns of regional elite socialisation has been offset by potential gains such as advances in regional conflict management, transparency and rule-based interactions. But the realisation of a more ‘participatory regionalism’ in Southeast Asia faces a number of barriers, including obstacles to further democratisation, the continued salience of the non-interference doctrine and the diminished space for civil society in the wake of the 11 September terrorist attacks.

This article explores how traditional modes of regional interaction in Southeast Asia are undergoing transformation as a result of rapid changes in domestic political structures. The key force for change identified here is democratisation. Unlike in Europe, regional institution building in Southeast Asia was not founded upon a shared commitment to liberal democracy. The founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was helped by the common desire of its members to ensure the survival of regimes which had by then retreated significantly from their postcolonial experiments in liberal democracy. This orientation was further institutionalised by ASEAN’s doctrine of non-interference, which helped to shield its members from outside pressures towards democratisation.
Since the ‘people’s power’ revolution in the Philippines in 1986, Southeast Asia has experienced an incremental process of democratisation. The Philippines was followed by Thailand, then Cambodia, and more recently Indonesia. Only Burma has clearly gone in the opposite direction. But pro-democracy forces opposing the junta in Burma have been active in Thailand. The democratic transition in Indonesia has had an effect in encouraging pro-democratic sentiments in neighbouring states, especially Malaysia.

The process of democratisation during the late 1980s and 1990s (Acharya, 1999) has called into question the ASEAN model of elite-centric regional socialisation. Political change in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia has engendered efforts at democratising regionalism. The civil society in the region demands greater openness in Southeast Asian regionalism.

This article begins by proposing a conceptual framework for analysing the relationship between democratisation and regionalism. This is followed by an examination of the consequences of democratisation for the traditional structures and dynamics of Southeast Asian regionalism. The key argument here is that while these consequences are mixed, the displacement of traditional patterns of regional elite socialisation has been offset by gains such as advances in regional conflict management, transparency and rule-based interactions. Moreover, these pave the way for a more ‘participatory regionalism’ in Southeast Asia. The final section of the article examines the key aspects of this participatory regionalism.

Democratisation and regionalism: a conceptual framework

The consequence of democratisation for regionalism can be examined in terms of a number of hypotheses. First, democratisation may alter the domestic political climate on which regional interactions are based. Preoccupation with democratisation diverts the attention and resources of leaders from regional co-operation. The advent of a new and legitimate regime may revive tensions over issues ‘settled’ by an unpopular ousted regime. Resurgent nationalism, which is often a feature of newly democratic states, could fuel such tensions. Civil society groups remain hostile towards regional institutions which backed the ousted regime. If the new regime happens to be led by people who, as opposition leaders, were severely persecuted by the ousted authoritarian but pro-regionalist regime, then the former’s commitment to the regional institution could be weak. In any regional institution, change in the top leadership of member states can disrupt socialisation with fellow members. But this is especially true of regional institutions founded upon close interpersonal ties and informal contacts among leaders and elites. In other words, regional institutions established and maintained by authoritarian states could lose legitimacy and support from within the population of those member states that have experienced greater domestic political openness.

Second, democratisation may call into question the sanctity of existing regional norms and the relevance of existing institutional mechanisms. The instability that accompanies democratisation has a spill-over effect which may strain the norms of regional institutions committed to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Democratic rulers, pandering to nationalist sentiments,
could become less inclined to resort to collective procedures and practices for conflict management. Institutions and procedures favoured by an ousted dictator, especially if he happens to be from a leading member state, may be discredited in the changed political climate. Added to this are the consequences of democratisation for self-determination in ethnically divided autocracies. Leaders of separatist movements who become leaders of new states created by the collapse of an authoritarian polity are likely to be hostile towards a regional grouping which had previously not supported their cause or even acquiesced with their suppression out of deference to regional norms. Finally, uneven democratisation within a regional grouping could polarise members over key political issues, including promotion of human rights and democracy through regional means. The non-democratic members are likely to strongly resist any political proposals for pro-democracy changes coming from the democratic camp.

Democratisation may also have a number of positive consequences for regionalism. Democratic transition may create unanticipated moments of boldness in foreign policy, which could break long-standing stalemates in regional conflicts. This is partly because of the impulsive move by newly democratic states to distance themselves from the policies of their authoritarian predecessors. Moreover, by seeking a broader range of views on foreign policy and permitting greater domestic discussion and debate over foreign policy goals, democracies may be able to offer alternative solutions to existing regional conflicts. In fact, contrary to a popular belief that newly installed democracies destabilise their neighbourhood by seeking to ‘export’ their revolution, one finds evidence that democracies often deal creatively and responsibly with their neighbours, including those with whom they might have been embroiled in conflict. As will be discussed later, the case of Thailand in the late 1980s supports this argument.

Democratisation creates more domestic transparency in ways beneficial to regional understanding and trust. Transition to democratic rule brings in its wake availability of greater information about a state’s national security and financial policies and assets. This could reduce suspicions among neighbours and expand regional security and economic co-operation. Democratisation may lead to more open and regularised interactions among states, reducing the importance of interpersonal contact. Democratisation produces greater openness and the rule of law not just within states, but also between them. Rule of law in the domestic context often leads to demands for rule-based interactions in the regional arena. This can be more conducive to regional collective problem solving.

Democratisation creates a deeper basis for regional socialisation by according space to civil society and accommodating its concerns. Most forms of regionalism in the developing world (indeed anywhere for that matter) have been highly state-centric, which in turn invites opposition to their agenda from domestic and international civic action groups. A grouping of more participatory polities could change this and thereby increase the chances for more effective responses to transnational issues.

Next, democratisation broadens the scope of the agenda of regional institutions, permitting a more relaxed view of sovereignty and allowing these institutions to address issues which might have been considered too sensitive to authoritarian states (such as human rights promotion). Newly empowered civil society
elements apply pressure on their own governments to find regional approaches to transnational issues such as the environment, refugees and migration. This increases the overall relevance of regional institutions in promoting regional peace and stability.

Last but not least, democratisation may secure better support for regional integration and co-operative projects from outside powers. In the changing international climate, where democracy and human rights have become ever more influential international norms, regional groupings of authoritarian states, or groupings that reluctantly tolerate authoritarianism out of deference to the principle of non-interference, are unlikely to find sympathy and support from international donors. Increasingly, the aid policies of bilateral and to some extent, multilateral donors are specifically tied to the human rights policies and democratic practices of recipient states. Domestic pressure in donor countries makes it difficult for them to support regional groupings perceived to be anti-human rights and democracy. On the other hand, more aid is now available to regional groupings which promote democracy and human rights.

**Authoritarianism, democracy and Southeast Asian regionalism**

Assessing the impact of democratisation on regionalism in Southeast Asia requires an understanding of the nexus between authoritarianism and the origins of ASEAN. A collective retreat from postcolonial experiments in liberal democracy was a key factor contributing to ASEAN’s formation and consolidation. Liberal democracy had a considerable appeal among Southeast Asian nationalists (with the exception of Vietnam). But their acceptance of democracy proved to be qualified and short-lived. The late 1950s marked the beginning of the end of the Southeast Asian nationalist elites’ flirtation with democratic systems modelled after their former colonial masters. A major shift occurred in Indonesia, where President Sukarno dismissed the legally elected parliament and established ‘guided democracy’ to replace the liberal ‘50 per cent plus one’ democracy in Indonesia (Yong, 1992: 433). A similar complaint against liberal democracy was lodged by President Marcos of the Philippines, who, nearing the end of his second elected term in office, imposed martial law in September 1972, citing the threat of communist insurgency. Marcos’s idea of ‘new society was centred on the principle of ‘constitutional authoritarianism’, emphasising the prior importance of stability over participatory politics (Yong, 1992: 426). In Malaysia and Singapore democratic institutions based on the British model fared better without any military takeovers. But in Malaysia as well as in Burma, domestic ethnic and communal discord contributed to the retreat of democracy. Malaysia’s ethnic politics, including tensions among the three principal groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians, imposed limits on the functioning of liberal democracy. The race riots in 1969 led to a major restructuring of the country’s political and economic system, including a temporary suspension of parliament, and an attempt by the Malay leadership to develop a more corporatist structure by co-opting many opposition parties to the ruling coalition, the National Alliance. The leadership then proclaimed a national ideology, the Rukunegara, which put a premium on loyalty to the king, country and constitution, banned debate on
sensitive issues such as the status of Malays, introduced a new economic policy that moved away from the laissez faire system and created policies to redistribute wealth in favour of Malays, redressing an economic imbalance. Singapore, too, developed into a dominant-party system.

Early academic explanations of democratic breakdowns in Southeast Asia emphasised cultural variables, especially the tension between traditional and modern concepts of power and authority. Lucian Pye contrasted two conceptions of authority in Southeast Asia: one influenced by colonial rule, bureaucratic, legal and rational; the other rooted in traditional culture and religion and producing a patrimonial political framework. The two were in constant conflict. Initially, the former prevailed because Western liberal notions of power were popular within nationalist movements dominated by Westernised elites. But subsequently a revival of traditional concepts of power produced a rejection of liberal democracy (Pye, 1985). Indonesia, in the shift from Sukarno to Suharto, provided the clearest example of this trend. Indonesia started its postcolonial polity by emulating European-style democracy, and its political system espoused a rational, legal and constitutional type of authority. But Sukarno abandoned this in favour of ‘guided democracy’ based on traditional patrimonial rule. He denounced Western political and social values, and urged a return to governance based on the traditional principles of consensus, gotong-rotong, and musjawarah, or community mutual assistance and discussion leading to consensus.

A return to more ‘indigenous’ conceptions of authority had implications not only for the domestic politics of the states concerned, which assumed an increasingly patrimonial character, it also shaped the conduct of foreign policy and regional co-operation, where it led to the emergence of the ‘ASEAN way’. ASEAN was established in 1967 with the initial membership of Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, countries, which had, to varying degrees, experienced a retreat from liberal democracy. While the outward objective of ASEAN was to promote socioeconomic development of its members, its core basis was the members’ common concern with regime survival in the face of domestic and external threats, especially communist subversion (Acharya, 1992). At the same time, ASEAN states, still nationalist-minded and zealous about their hard-earned sovereignty, rejected Western models of regionalism, such as the supranational and highly institutionalised European Community framework. In this context the traditional principles of gotong-rotong and musjawarah seemed an ideal way to develop regional co-operation. The ‘ASEAN way’ was defined in terms of informality, consultations and consensus, organisational minimalism and flexibility (Acharya, 2000b). On the surface, the process of consultations and consensus in ASEAN, with its basis in traditional culture, is supposed to be a democratic approach to decision making, but the ASEAN process was managed through close interpersonal contacts among the top leaders, who shared a reluctance to institutionalise and legalise co-operation which could undermine the regime’s control over the conduct of regional co-operation. Negotiations within ASEAN had no input from civil society and no feedback mechanism to take account of public opinion. Issues of human rights, democracy and environment were kept strictly off ASEAN’s agenda. Non-interference in the internal affairs of member states was the core ASEAN norm, except that ASEAN governments...
developed an extensive network of bilateral security ties aimed at denying sanctuaries to insurgent groups and suppressing them. Overall, the ‘ASEAN way’ supported a narrow elite-centred and sovereignty-bound framework of regionalism confined to intergovernmental contacts, providing little scope for collectively addressing emerging transnational issues such as the environment, migration, refugees or for securing the involvement of social forces in the regional identity-building project. These main features of the ‘ASEAN way’, including its emphasis on regional cultural patterns and identity, avoidance of legalistic institutions and norms, dependence on high-level leaders, the tendency to ‘sweep conflicts under the carpet’ so as not to create Western-style adversarial negotiating and bargaining postures, and state-centrism, qualified it as the core basis of Southeast Asia’s ‘patrimonial regionalism’.

Southeast Asia’s collective descent to authoritarian rule had paradoxical effects on regional order. It introduced an element of political convergence to what had been a strikingly diverse membership in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, colonial legacy and postcolonial polity (Acharya, 2000a). ASEAN members, with a common fear of Vietnamese communism, embraced the ‘free market’ while keeping their political systems closed or semi-closed. This combination proved acceptable, indeed, highly convenient, to the Western powers in the Cold War geopolitical climate. As a result, Western economic and political support for ASEAN, including access to markets, foreign investment and aid, and diplomatic support for ASEAN’s international campaign to punish Vietnam, contributed to its reputation and image as an effective manager of regional problems. This, along with the common internal threat perceived from communist subversion and ethnic separatism, led to the amelioration of intra-mural disputes within ASEAN, thereby paving the way for its emergence as a viable regional grouping. Authoritarianism and regionalism proved to be mutually complementary.

Democratic transitions in three out of the four cases in Southeast Asia (Philippines 1986, Thailand 1991–92, Cambodia, 1993 and Indonesia, 1998) over the past 15 years have not produced a regime which has willingly undermined its state-centric regionalism. There was no downgrading or change in the commitments of the Philippines and Thailand to ASEAN in the wake of democratic transitions. Instead, the solidarity shown by ASEAN leaders to President Cory Aquino may have enhanced the regime’s dependence on ASEAN support and strengthened regionalism. The democratisation of Cambodia under the UN’s auspices made it more suitable for membership in ASEAN, although it is debatable whether this move strengthened or weakened the organisation. Hun Sen’s tirades against ASEAN for postponing Cambodia’s accession in 1997 in response to his ‘coup’ stopped when Cambodia was finally admitted in 1999 after undertaking necessary democratic changes.

But democratisation has certainly altered the political climate of regional interactions in Southeast Asia. The domestic preoccupation of the newly democratic regime in Indonesia has led it to neglect regional co-operation (Acharya, 2000c). Indonesia has not reneged on any of the commitments of its predecessor to ASEAN but there remains a possibility that the new Indonesian nationalism could translate into animosity against specific ASEAN neighbours. Indonesia’s recent problems with Malaysia and Singapore (for very different reasons) attest to this
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possibility. Both Singapore and Malaysia have made a firm commitment to Indonesian territorial integrity in the wake of the separation of East Timor. But this did not prevent bilateral ties from being damaged over political issues. The new Indonesian government’s support for pro-

reformasi forces in Malaysia led by Anwar Ibrahim angered Malaysia. Singapore, despite having courted Abdurrahman Wahid before his election as president, was not spared his wrath over its perceived failure to offer economic support. And the Megawati government has responded to Singapore’s demand for stronger action against terrorist suspects taking shelter in Indonesia by citing its democratic political system, which does not permit arbitrary arrests of the kind that Internal Security Acts in Malaysia and Singapore facilitate.

Democratisation has disrupted the traditional pattern of elite socialisation within ASEAN. The departure of Suharto, ‘the father of ASEAN’, compounded the impact of generational shifts in the old ASEAN. Another change induced by democratisation is the growing criticism and rejection of the ‘ASEAN way’. Although much of this criticism was initially inspired by ASEAN’s perceived inability to respond effectively to the Asian economic crisis, there is certainly a link with the democratisation process in the region, especially in Thailand. The Thai government’s call for ‘flexible engagement’ and a more open ASEAN during 1998–99 was partly inspired by a desire to project its own democratic credentials. The climate of regional interactions is also affected by the growing voice of regional social movements. Civil societies in Indonesia and elsewhere in the region have felt resentful towards ASEAN for its reluctance to support their cause or involve them in its decision making. This has led to a call from the NGO community in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia and Malaysia for ASEAN to become more open. Democratisation has thus undermined the legitimacy of ASEAN’s elite-centred regionalism.

While democratisation has altered the climate of regionalism in Southeast Asia, this does not imply a threat to regional order. Three benefits of democratisation to regional order may be cited. First, democratisation in Thailand offered a breakthrough in regional conflicts in the late 1980s. Then, under a new government elected through a legitimate democratic process, Thailand adopted a foreign policy which had as its objective, the transformation of the ‘Indochinese battlefields to marketplaces’. This dramatic turn was in direct violation of the existing ASEAN policy, which disallowed regular economic contacts with Indochina in the absence of a Vietnamese military withdrawal from Cambodia. The new Thai government might have acted out of economic expediency (the actual lure of Indochinese resources and markets), or out of sheer geopolitical ambition (to develop a Thai-dominated Southeast Asian heartland as implicit under the government’s revival of the traditional Thai Golden Peninsula concept). But the outcome was a relaxation of regional tensions. It helped to reduce Vietnamese suspicions of ASEAN, and encouraged greater moderation on the part of Hanoi, leading to its decision to withdraw its forces from Cambodia, a key step towards the eventual settlement.

Second, by engendering greater transparency in the domestic arena, democratisation could help mitigate intra-regional suspicions. Democratic reforms in Thailand and Indonesia have allowed greater information on Thai defence
spending and exposed the corruption in arms procurement that drove defence expenditures in Indonesia under Suharto. Democratisation in the Philippines has led to a defence procurement and spending system which is subject to legislative scrutiny. Third, as will be discussed in the next section, democratisation in Southeast Asia has also produced demands for more open and rule-based regional institutions. The economic crisis in 1997 was partly blamed on the elite-centred regionalism that prevented members from sharing vital economic information about their national economies as an early-warning mechanism. This has led to demands for more transparency and peer review in the regional political economy.

Towards participatory regionalism

Against this backdrop we examine the relevance of new concepts and approaches towards a more participatory regionalism in Southeast Asia. The term ‘participatory regionalism’ as used here 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 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.

In post-crisis Southeast Asia both elements of participatory regionalism are evident. This is found in the idea of ‘flexible engagement’ advanced by the Thai Foreign Minister of the period, Surin Pitsuwan. This approach, like the idea of ‘constructive intervention’ advanced by the now-deposed Anwar Ibrahim (Acharya, 1997), was not an outright rejection of state sovereignty. In the economic arena, it called for greater openness in regional consultations, information sharing, and peer review of domestic economic policies. In the political arena, it sought the right of a member to criticise what it considered to be unacceptable internal conduct of fellow ASEAN regimes; for example, Thailand claimed a right to criticise the human rights abuses and anti-democracy policies of the regime in Burma. Flexible engagement thus implied a dilution of ASEAN’s principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states.

Intended to correct what the minister perceived to be a primary reason behind ASEAN’s ineffectual response to the regional economic panic, flexible engagement was also a response to the growing seriousness of transnational challenges: forest fires in Indonesia and the resulting haze which affected neighbouring states, causing serious economic and health concerns; drug trafficking and refugee flows out of Burma. These have had a lot to do with Thailand’s more interventionist attitude towards Burma’s domestic affairs. Surin also invoked the need for such a policy in the wake of ASEAN’s failure to provide a timely response to the bloodshed in East Timor during the course of its separation from Indonesia, out of
deferece to strict non-interference. As a policy, flexible engagement had strong roots in changing Thai domestic politics. The Chuan Leekpai government disliked its country’s past support for the ‘constructive engagement’ policy, and did not want to be seen as part of a ‘club of dictators’ (a reference to ASEAN, which accepted Burma as a member despite international protests). The desire to pursue a new course was also inspired by the Chuan government’s own democratic impulse, as its predecessor, though nominally democratic and legitimate, was widely seen to be under greater military influence. (Its Prime Minister, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, played a key role in the origins of the constructive engagement policy towards Burma and the Thai military had been implicated in cultivating the Burmese junta.)

Resistance from Singapore, Malaysia and the Suharto and Habibie governments in Indonesia to flexible engagement succeeded in reducing it to a much more sovereignty conforming ‘Enhanced interaction’ concept. One of the striking features of the debate over non-interference in ASEAN has been to expose a clear division between the democratic and authoritarian members over the issue (for details, see Acharya, 2000b; Kraft, 2000). The most severe critics of flexible engagement have been Vietnam and Burma. The Philippines has been a supporter and Indonesia since the advent of a democratic government has signalled a more open attitude towards the issue of outside roles in its domestic affairs. To quote Adian Silalahi, Director General of ASEAN in the Indonesian Foreign Ministry:

We still adhere to those principles [of ASEAN], but I believe that on this issue [non-intervention] we are more open now. It is no longer a principle which cannot be discussed. Indonesia is more open, more flexible because of the democratization process. (cited in Suryodiningrat, 2000: 1)

Until now, the engagement of civil society in ASEAN has been minimal. Traditionally, there has been far greater co-operation between ASEAN intelligence agencies than ASEAN social movements. The Track-II processes, which are sometimes cited as examples of the participation of civil society in regional institution building, are in reality dominated by government-sponsored and supported think-tanks. Moreover, a key principle of Track-II, the participation of government officials ‘in their private capacity’ has rarely been upheld in practice; seldom have these officials been able to rise above national interests and concerns.

For their part, Southeast Asian NGOs have developed their own separate identities, networks and approaches (Lizee, 2000), adopting mainly confrontational tactics that condemn ASEAN’s pursuit of economic globalisation and its neglect of, and tolerance for, human rights abuses and anti-democratic practices in the region. Several such regional coalitions of NGOs, some of them linked to wider Asian networks, have emerged. One clear example of NGO networking was the parallel meeting of Asian and Western NGOs in Bangkok in 1993, when a group of Asian governments were meeting to decide on a common strategy for the impending Vienna World Conference on Human Rights. Subsequently, Asian NGOs have participated in protests against APEC’s free trade agenda, most clearly visible during its Vancouver summit in 1997, and in parallel summits organised during the sessions of ASEAN, APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The
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high profile campaigns of groups such as the Asia Pacific Conference on East Timor (APCET) and Alternative ASEAN (ALTSEAN), a group mobilising international opinion against the regime in Burma, as well as anti-logging protests by Thai NGOs, exemplify such types of civil society regionalism.

NGO campaigns in the area of human rights and sustainable development have increasingly been pursued at a regional level. Forum-Asia, the largest and most prominent transnational NGO in Southeast Asia seeks to ‘facilitate collaboration among human rights organizations in the region so as to develop a regional response on issues of common concern in the region’ (Forum Asia, nd). The Manila People’s Forum on APEC, created as a parallel grouping to challenge the Manila APEC Summit in 1996, described itself as a ‘dynamic consultative process aimed at … formulating a people’s response to APEC and coming up with a regional strategy of equitable and sustainable development’ (Manila People’s Forum on APEC, 1996).

Forum Asia’s activities include monitoring and reporting on human rights violations, conducting human rights educational activities, and organising fact-finding missions and trial observations (Forum Asia, 2000, 2001). The Bangkok-based Focus on the Global South, along with the Malaysia-based Third World Network, has been at the forefront of campaigns to create greater awareness of the dangers of globalisation and has organised protests against the exploitation of labour and the environment by multinationals. The environment has also become another key issue for mobilising social movements, especially in the wake of massive forest fires in Indonesia in 1997, which led to widespread ecological and economic damage. Southeast Asian NGOs have also called for alternative approaches to national security that emphasise the security of people over that of states and regimes (Forum Asia, 1997). Major NGOs with a regional focus are presented in Table 1.

Several developments have helped to promote a more co-operative relationship between official and civil society regionalism in Southeast Asia. New transnational challenges, such as the environment and refugees, have led to a greater appreciation of the role of NGOs, which have traditionally been key players both in terms of knowledge possession, and of their pursuit of causes and campaigns to highlight civil society demands which may run counter to state policy. Regional and international co-operation among NGOs is a way of overcoming the constraints imposed by limited domestic resources and support, especially in cases where the home governments remain intolerant of NGO activism (Personal interview, Forum Asia, 21 June 2002). Political openness in Thailand and now Indonesia has involved the empowerment of NGOs with a regional and transnational agenda. Greater external support for Asian NGOs, induced by post-cold war policy initiatives towards human rights promotion and sustainable development, has helped the regional NGO movement. This is now supplemented by the call for ‘human security’ espoused both by Western countries and by Japan. At the root of the human security concept is the recognition of threats to the safety and dignity of the individual (Acharya & Acharya, 2000). The attendant shift from state or regime security provides a conceptual justification for the closer involvement of civil society and social movements in forms of regional cooperation that had traditionally been the exclusive preserve of governments.
### Table 1

**Selected Southeast Asian NGOs with a regional focus**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of NGO</th>
<th>Head office</th>
<th>Main issue areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the Global South</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>Campaign against neoliberal globalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum Asia)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Promote democracy, human rights and a regional response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALTSEAN (Alternative ASEAN)</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>Human rights and democracy in Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia Pacific Conference in East Timor (APCET)</td>
<td>Sittings varied</td>
<td>Human rights and self-determination in East Timor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third World Network</td>
<td>Penang (Malaysia)</td>
<td>Campaign against neoliberal globalisation; human rights (social and economic rights)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Environmental protection issues in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee for Asian Women</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>Women’s issues, especially labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Via Campesina (South East Asia)</td>
<td>Bangkok (?) C/o Assembly of Poor</td>
<td>Peasants, farmers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition Against Trafficking in women in Asia-Pacific (CATW-Asia-Pacific)</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Women’s rights (anti-prostitution and trafficking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Human rights (culture taken into account)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Workers in Asia (CWA)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Children rights (especially in work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT International)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Children rights (anti-child pornography)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Women’s rights (especially trafficking in women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Indigenous Peoples’ Pact (AIPP)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Indigenous people rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Women’s rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Housing rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Regional Resource Center for Human Rights Education (ARRC)</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Human rights education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition Against Trafficking in Women in Asia-Pacific (CATW-Asia-Pacific)</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Women’s rights (anti-prostitution and trafficking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Young Christian Students (IYCS)</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Human rights education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Personal Interviews with NGO officials, Bangkok, January 2001 and June 2002; Directory of Asia and the Pacific Organizations Related to Human Rights Education Work (1999).*

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Despite their continuing suspicion of governments, some NGOs have been amenable to working with them. Such co-operation is often issue-specific, conditional and context-dependent; for example, Forum Asia has been willing to work with governments on women’s rights, but not on Burma (Personal interview, Forum Asia, 21 June 2002). Some NGOs resort to direct action and protest only if access to the state is unavailable. They are more willing to work with democratic governments which offer them such access, such as the Thai government under Chuan Leekpai during 1997–2001 (Personal interview, Forum Asia, 25 June 2001). For their part, some ASEAN government leaders have increasingly acknowledged the need to engage domestic and regional civil society. Initial efforts at mutual accommodation have led to the holding of the first ‘ASEAN People’s Assembly’ in November 2000 in Indonesia, immediately following an ASEAN Summit in Singapore. Organised by a group Southeast Asian think-tanks, the People’s Assembly is designated as a Track-III mechanism because it brings together government officials (both serving and retired), Track-II groups (mainly government-supported think-tanks) and NGOs. If the Assembly is any indication, a Track-III mechanism in Southeast Asia could become a useful vehicle for a more participatory form of regionalism by providing an arena for debates and discussions between states and citizens about subjects over which governments have thus far exercised strict control. These issues range from poverty reduction to the relevance of ASEAN in dealing with East Timor and Burma. The principle of ‘open economies, open societies’ debated at the inaugural People’s Assembly, for example, illustrates one approach to a possible common ground between the NGO communities who oppose economic globalisation, while demanding political openness, and regional governments who have thus far advocated open economies but not open societies. Track-III processes also have a potential to engender domestic and regional support for softer concepts of sovereignty and to allow more space for dissent and criticism in the conduct of regional interactions. It is significant that both the official and NGO participants at the inaugural People’s Assembly seemed to accept more universal standards of human rights and sovereignty, thereby diluting the strong ‘cultural relativist’ opposition to these ideas displayed by the region’s elite in the not-too-distant past.

Pressures toward a participatory regionalism in Southeast Asia reflect several factors at work, with democratisation being a key force. Indeed, the holding of the ASEAN People’s Assembly reflects the work of pro-democracy elements within the ASEAN Track-II elite, despite opposition from the governments of Burma, Laos and Vietnam. The Track-II grouping is seeking to make itself more effective by developing a wider social base that includes a moderate section of the ASEAN community. There is also the suggestion that the Track-III process reflects a desire on the part of Track-II to ‘co-opt’ elements of the regional civil society. For the latter, the incentives to participate in a regional Track-III process include the possibility of securing greater contacts and possibly influence with the regional governments, with Track-II, with its own close rapport with governments, serving as a bridge. As one NGO representative put it, initiatives such as the ASEAN People’s Assembly ‘create space’ for the regional civil society (Personal interview, Forum Asia, 21 June 2002). In addition, working with
Track-II can mean better access to the latter’s research and other resources, which NGOs lack. By working with Track-II within a Track-III framework, regional NGOs can improve their research capacity and policy prescriptions.\(^7\)

International pressures and incentives have also been at work in the development of a more participatory regionalism in Southeast Asia. For one thing, NGOs have targeted the annual summit meetings of APEC to organise vocal parallel NGO summits (Manila People’s Forum on APEC, 1996).\(^8\) Western donors, especially Canada, provided financial support for the hosting of the ASEAN People’s Assembly. Some ASEAN member governments for their part have come to the realisation that making some accommodation towards the NGOs will improve the political climate for their own interactions with Western countries. This is especially relevant to ASEAN’s relations with the EU, which had been severely strained by the issue of Burma’s membership in ASEAN. In this sense at least, democratisation, and the resulting reshaping of regional institutions, can yield the benefit of creating a more favourable climate for interactions between ASEAN and the international community.

**Constraints of participatory regionalism**

The foregoing section has identified a number of factors which promote the development of a participatory and non-official regionalism in Southeast Asia. But it is important to recognise the limits of this development, especially in the post-11 September regional and global political climate. Three main obstacles to the further development of participatory regionalism can be identified.

First, ASEAN itself has shown a strong resistance to post-sovereign regional norms. It shows no explicit commitment to democracy and human rights adopted by European or Latin American regional institutions. Thailand’s commitment to human rights and democracy in its regional foreign policy agenda has declined since the ouster of the Chuan Leekpai government in 2001. Second, the democratisation process in Southeast Asia remains incomplete and uneven, with several states, such as Burma and Vietnam, remaining firmly under authoritarian rule. Democratic consolidation in Indonesia faces a number of serious challenges and constraints. So the prospects for ASEAN as a democratic community remain a far off possibility. Third, the terrorist attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001 and in Bali on 12 October 2002 have diminished the space for civil society in the region. Measures undertaken by regional governments to counter the threat of terrorism have cast a shadow over civil liberties. Indonesia has enacted new security laws, and the internal security acts in Singapore and Malaysia now enjoy the backing of Western countries, including the USA. Homeland security has assumed priority over human security. Muslim civil society groups have come under government scrutiny for their alleged links with terrorist networks. ASEAN governments are developing new forms of internal security co-operation to counter transborder terrorism. This could lead to a reassertion of Southeast Asia’s official regionalism at the expense of civil society networks (Acharya, 2002a; 2002b).
Conclusion

This article has shown that democratisation in Southeast Asia is reshaping Southeast Asian regionalism by redefining official attitudes towards state sovereignty and opening space for the involvement of civil society. Both these developments are limited; if pushed further, they would pave the way for deeper regional interaction and problem solving. Newly democratic states have been more willing to depart from a strict adherence to sovereignty norms than authoritarian states. This finding from Southeast Asia should be of interest to students of Third World politics and security. Juridical sovereignty has been a key factor behind regime security and regional order in the Third World. Few scholars have seriously considered, let alone investigated, the conditions under which weak states in the Third World might deliberately seek a dilution of their juridical sovereignty as a way of enhancing the prospects for regional order. The cases of Thailand and the Philippines suggest the importance of democratisation as one such condition.

The emergence and role of regional institutions are often the product of domestic political institutions and structures. ASEAN’s creation was facilitated by the common shift of its members towards greater authoritarianism and reflected non-democratic values. But the vulnerability of a closed, highly informal and patrimonial ASEAN has been clearly demonstrated by recent events. The pressure is now for ASEAN to move towards a more participatory form of regionalism, one that takes a less rigid view of non-interference, one that addresses a wider range of transnational issues, and becomes more responsive to the demands of the civil society. Democratisation can make an important contribution to the quest for durable and effective regional institutions. Democratisation enhances the legitimacy of the regional project by opening the regional public space to civil society elements and makes it less vulnerable to the personal preferences and idiosyncratic habits of leaders. It can induce greater respect for the rule of law in regional governance.

Regionalism in Southeast Asia is confronting new challenges as a result of the enlargement of ASEAN, the continuing economic and social fallout of the Asian financial crisis, and the domestic instability of its largest actor, Indonesia. Moreover, thanks to the entry of new non-democratic members (Burma, Vietnam and Laos) and the progressive democratisation in three key original member countries (the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia), the political diversity within ASEAN has never been greater. This has undermined its unity in responding to the economic and political challenges facing the region. As ASEAN confronts greater intra-mural division, adjusting to the pressures of democratisation presents new opportunities for the organisation to broaden the social bases and political agenda of ASEAN regionalism, and make it more relevant to the challenges of globalisation. But the shift to ‘participatory regionalism’ faces a number of challenges, which, if overcome, can have decisive and long-term implications for regional order in Southeast Asia.

Notes

This paper revisits an earlier work (Acharya, 1992) in which I examined the linkage between regionalism and regime security in Southeast Asia. The present paper is an attempt to ascertain how this link has
evolved and changed in the wake of trends toward democratisation in the region.

1. Etel Solingen’s (1999) analysis of regional orders examines how domestic economic liberalisation can lead to more stable and peaceful regional order, with economic liberalisation linked to the democratisation process. For a more general treatment of the relationship between democratisation and regionalism, see the Special Issue of *Journal of Democracy*, 4 (3) 1993; and Farer (1996). On the relationship between democracy and the emergence of a regional security community in Europe, see Adler (1998). The absence of such a link in the making of a security community in Southeast Asia is explored in Acharya (1998). There have been some studies of this relationship with respect to Latin America. See Munoz (1993), Patomaki (2000) and Petrash (2000).

2. The traditional Javanese rural practice of *muyawarah* and *mufakat*, on which the ASEAN way is based, conformed to the patron–client model of leadership as it required the decisive guiding hand of a village elder who managed the consultation process and defined the consensus. See Pye (1985).

3. The term ‘patrimonial regionalism’ is extrapolated here from the Weberian concept of patrimonial authority or paternalistic authority used by scholars of domestic and comparative politics. Lucian Pye, for example, lists a number of features of the latter: ‘an overriding concern for unity’, the regime’s demand for ‘conformity’ for the sake of ‘collective good’, domestic institutions that are ‘adjuncts’ of governments or are a ‘product of government prodding’, rejection of ‘adversary relations’ in domestic bargaining (‘The reason why strong … institutions have not emerged under Asian paternalistic authority is clear: with paternalism, adversary relations are an abomination’), preference for institutions that are not ‘rigorously codified’, but which are ‘pliable … [and] can be bent to the convenience of the power holders’, and the overall ‘weakness of institutional constraints’ on political authority (Pye, 1985: 329–331). Many of these features can be applied to the regional level to examine the nature of ASEAN and the ASEAN way. It should be emphasised, however, that initially these features were credited with making ASEAN flexible and relatively effective in reducing and managing inter-state conflicts. Peter Katzenstein (1997) has drawn a link between the non-Weberian (non legal–rational) nature of domestic political structures in Asia and the informal and under-institutionalised form of its regional institutions, especially ASEAN. For other discussions of ‘patrimonial authority’ in domestic politics, see Rudolph & Rudolph (1979); and Theobald (1982).

4. This included S Rajaratnam, Singapore’s retired foreign minister and a founder of ASEAN. See Acharya (1993).

5. The link between Thai democratisation and its concept of flexible engagement was drawn explicitly by Surin in the following words: ‘Our commitment to freedom and democracy underlies Thailand’s “flexible engagement” initiative … In proposing this free, open and intensified interaction among the ASEAN member countries, Thailand hopes to prepare ASEAN to meet the challenges of globalisation that are transforming the international environment into a “world without borders”’ (Pitsuwan, 1998).

6. The topics at the ASEAN People’s Assembly included plenary sessions on: Setting ASEAN’s Agenda: The Role of the People; Towards Open Societies in ASEAN: The Issues; ASEAN and Regional Community Building; and Reflections on ASEAN. There were panel discussions on: Critical Assessment of the ASEAN 2020 Vision; Globalisation and Human Security; The Power of Women and Their Empowerment; The Media: Informer, Educator and Reformer?; Towards a Regional Human Rights Mechanism; The Role of Civil Society in Good Governance: Poverty in ASEAN: What More to be Done?; Limits and Opportunities of Resources and Environmental Management; Enhanced Interaction: Case Studies of Myanmar and East Timor; and Towards a Revolution in ASEAN’s Education Systems.

7. For these and other insights into the ASEAN People’s Assembly, I am grateful to Paul Evans and Pierre Lizee, two Canadian scholars who participated in the meeting.

8. The Manila People’s Forum on APEC, attended by 400–500 delegates, was a direct successor to the Kyoto NGO Forum in November 1995 (120 delegates) and the Jakarta NGO Conference, November 1994 (a handful of delegates).

References


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