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## Civil Society and Other Political Possibilities in Southeast Asia

Garry Rodan\*

In the last decade we have witnessed the end of the Cold War and the collapse of various authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, Latin America and East Asia. Not surprisingly, this has led to a great deal of attention in policy and academic circles to the prospects of political liberalization outside the established liberal democracies. A crucial aspect of the debates around this question involves the newly-industrialising countries of East Asia. Much has been made of the way rapid industrialization has brought with it social transformations, such as expanded and more diverse middle classes, that have manifested in pressures for greater political pluralism. Indeed, many theorists contend that the demise of authoritarian rule in East Asian societies such as South Korea and Taiwan not only reflects the close nexus between economic development and "democratisation" but also broadly mirrors the future for Southeast Asian NICs in their wake. The emergence of civil society, involving organisations independent of government and giving expression to a more complex and differentiated society, is seen as a crucial ingredient in this "democratisation."

This projection, and the theoretical sources which underlie it, are open to contest from a variety of perspectives. However, one of the most concerted attempts to refute it has come in the form of a set of culturalist arguments about the existence of an 'Asian alternative' to 'Western liberalism'. Put simply, it is contended that core Asian values rooted in traditional culture militate against the establishment of liberal democracy in the region. In this view, there is certainly no inevitable flourishing of civil society in Asia as capitalist development advances. While this view is understandably popular among custodians of authoritarian rule in East and Southeast Asia, it enjoys wide appeal inside policy and academic circles in the established liberal democracies too.

In this article, we critically examine the proposition that the cultural distinctiveness of Asia poses an obstacle to civil society. It will be argued that while there certainly is no inevitable flourishing of civil society in Asia as capitalist development proceeds, this is not a function of any cultural predisposition of Asian societies. Rather, historical factors have meant that relationships between the middle and business classes and the state in East and Southeast Asia are unlikely to reflect the

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dominant patterns of early industrialising countries. More particularly, there are means other than civil society through which the aspirations for political change might be accommodated, of which selective co-optation of social forces is the most prevalent. Political pluralism, in other words, may be possible without a vibrant civil society.

At the same time, the capacity of authoritarian regimes to promote and institutionalise alternatives to civil society in East and Southeast Asia is not uniform. The different constellations of social and political forces in the region are manifesting in various combinations and strengths in the pressures for civil society. Contrary to the Asian values line, the region is likely to be increasingly marked by political diversity including the possible emergence of more extensive civil societies in some cases. There are social forces which are increasingly resistant to, or not amenable to, co-optation by the state. The Asian values discourse, at least as it is employed by authoritarian leaders in Asia, is an ideological response to this - an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of such challenges by effectively labelling them "unAsian" or "alien."

Yet if the emergence of civil society is a possible, though not an inevitable, byproduct of capitalist development in Southeast Asia, it must be underlined that civil society contains politically diverse elements. Contrary to the popular positive connotations attached to civil society, groups that exist outside the state have divergent values and agendas, not all of which are marked by political tolerance or liberal democracy. Indeed, some forces within civil society hold to blatantly elitist and anti-democratic values. They may seek the right to operate independently of the state to shape the exercise of state power and influence public policy, but this doesn't mean they endorse the rights of all independent organisations to do likewise. Nor does it mean their internal organisational structures or practices reflect democratic or egalitarian principles.

What this implies is that attempts to foster the development of a liberal civil society need to focus energies on the promotion of particular organisations. Those organisations need to embrace the notion of universal rights to be involved in the shaping of public policy. Some organizations currently seeking an expansion of civil society in East and Southeast Asia base their case around elitist notions such as meritocracy. According to this, the policy process should be opened up to those with expertise, but not to all interested parties. The greatest potential of civil society to act as a force for political liberalization rests in its potential to institutionalise the rights of interested parties - those affected by policy decisions - to influence the decision-making process. But apart from distinguishing between liberal-oriented organizations and others in civil society, some in the former camp are more strategic than others in opening up the political process.

### *The Concept of Civil Society*

The concept of civil society has a long history, throughout which it has assumed a variety of meanings (See Keane, 1988; Bobbio, 1989; Kumar, 1993; Reitzes, 1994; Tester, 1992; Gellner, 1994). This reflects in the diverse usages of the concept's current revival that has been precipitated by events in Latin America, Eastern Europe and East Asia where authoritarian regimes have been challenged over the last decade. As Kumar (1993, p. 383) observes, "today, civil society has been found in the economy and the polity; in the area between the family and the state, or the individual and the state; in the non-state institutions which organise and educate citizens for political participation; even as an expression of the whole civilising mission of modern society." The common theme to these divergent understandings of civil society is the generally positive political connotations ascribed to it. To some extent this reflects the dominance of liberal theory which champions the rational individual, often operating co-operatively with others in pursuit of mutual interest. But the disillusionment of many other theorists with state-centred analyses which failed to anticipate the strength of social forces in Eastern Europe and elsewhere has added to the analytical and normative emphasis on civil society.

Despite the problems arising from such diverse meanings attached to the concept of civil society, it remains a crucial conceptual tool in the analysis of contemporary societies as well as an influential political ideal. However, we must be clear in our usage of the term and careful not to unconsciously conflate the conceptual with the normative. With this in mind, it is argued here that civil society is one form of political space. As will be argued later, there is no inevitability that civil society will prove to be the most effective or common political accommodation in East and Southeast Asia to the pressures for change from domestic populations.

Political space refers to the avenues for contesting and shaping public policy, not all of which involve the institutionalised and legally-protected right to independence from the state which characterises civil society. This independence of civil society is not absolute, since it is itself reliant upon the state for its enshrinement, but it is nevertheless qualitatively different from other political spaces involving varying degrees of incorporation with, or co-option by, the state. Owing to the greater independence from the state, the political space of civil society affords the most substantive capacity and potential for social forces to both resist and co-operate with the state in their own interests. The concept is thus indispensable for qualitatively differentiating between varieties of political space. However, it must be stressed that this greater oppositional capacity of civil society does not in itself determine the content of political demands.

But before developing this particular point, and completing the definition of civil society, let us take a quick excursion through the dominant literature. In this way, the problems of much of the prevailing usage and the distinctiveness of the understand-

ing of civil society here might be better appreciated. It should be emphasized that this brief survey of theoretical notions of civil society does not attempt to submit a representative survey of the literature. Rather, the focus is on those ideas of civil society that are most applied to East and Southeast Asia.

Among liberal theorists, definitions of civil society approvingly emphasize themes of independence, liberty, plurality and voluntary action. They are also generally inclusive of a wide range of groups embarking on collective action to secure particular interests. Diamond (1994, p. 5), for example, defines civil society as 'the realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-regulating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules'. He also contends that: "To the extent that an organization... seeks to monopolise a functional or political space in society, claiming that it represents the only legitimate path, it contradicts the pluralistic market-oriented nature of civil society" (Ibid., p. 7) Similarly, Mirsky (1993, p. 572) describes civil society as "a social sphere in which no single locus of authority predominates and in which men and women interact with each other in a series of overlapping relationships and associations - communal, civic, religious, economic, social, and cultural." In this conception of civil society, the groups involved may or may not be engaged in "political" activities.

The understanding of civil society in residual terms vis-a-vis the state - the realm of social relations not encompassed by the state - often carries with it powerful normative assumptions about this separation. As Parekh (1993, p. 160) points out, for liberal theorists, quite unlike civil society, the state is a coercive and compulsory institution: "coercive because it enjoys the power of life and death over its members, compulsory because its citizens are its members by birth and may not leave it, and outsiders may not enter it, without its approval." In this view, the role of government is to maximise the liberties of self-determining agents and to facilitate their goals, not to impose grand goals separate from these. The normative attachment to civil society is at times quite explicit in the literature. Kukathas and Lovell (1991, p. 36), for instance, assert that: "The ideological and political collapse of communism suggests that we should redirect our attention to the target of its attack: to reassert the functions of the traditions and institutions of civil society, and to ask what is necessary if its development or regeneration is to be made possible." They also contend that "civil society is important because of its contributions to the constitutions of human identity and the fulfilment of individual aspirations" (Ibid., p. 35-6). Others emphasise the "civility" of this particular social realm, which is sometimes depicted as protecting liberal democracy from the inherent dangers of extremism (Shils, 1971, p. 14).

The celebration of civil society and political pluralism associated with it are also a feature of the post-structuralist and post-modernist literature on new social movements. Here the juxtaposition of repressive state against liberal civil society is

arrived at via a somewhat different route, but the effect is fundamentally the same. According to Cohen and Arato (1992, p. 71), "Post-Marxists not only register, as did Gramsci, the durability of civil society under capitalist democracies and the consequent implausibility of revolution, but maintain the normative desirability of the preservation of civil society." They further observe that: "All of our relevant sources view liberal democracy as a necessary condition for bringing the modern state under control" (Ibid., p. 80). Again, the premise is the notion that the state is inherently predisposed to oppression, whereas civil society is the natural domain of liberty.

The emphasis on civil society as the dichotomous opposite of the state, and the fashionable identification by scholars with the former, brings with it a number of problems: the idealisation of civil society; the fostering of a zero-sum conception of the relationship between state and civil society; the obscuring of attempts to gain state power to shape relationship in civil society; and the conceptual concealment of ambiguous but significant relationships between state and society.

First, civil society is in fact the locus of a range of inequalities based on class, gender, ethnicity, race, and sexual preference, for example, that are symptomatic of specific economic, social and political relationships of power (Wood, 1990). The "tendency to demonise the state and deify civil society," as Reitzes (1994, p. 105) puts it, plays down this darker side, and ignores the fact that the internal structures and practices of autonomous organisations can be both *undemocratic* and *uncivil* - a point amply demonstrated in the organisations currently surfacing in Eastern Europe as well as those that emerged in South Africa during the 1980s (Reintges, 1990; Shubane, 1992, p. 41; Howe, 1991, p. 12; Salecl, 1992). Obviously the political implications of the various elements of civil society differ according to their respective objectives and practices.

In rapidly-industrialising East and Southeast Asia, regime opponents include reactionary elements. Economic change throws up a variety of challenges, not just those by new sources of power and wealth seeking more open and accountable public decision making. Rather, marginalised groups resistant to certain forms of change, such as the recently-banned Muslim fundamental non-government organisation (NGO) Al Arqam in Malaysia, are motivated by concern about the erosion of traditional religious values. Moreover, a range of elitist and hierarchical structures and ideologies characterise the various organisations surfacing in the region. Amongst new sources of power and wealth, the aspirations for political liberalization can be somewhat exclusive. It is worth remembering that the vision of "democracy" amongst many of the students involved in the 1989 demonstrations in China, for example, excluded any significant political participation or representation for workers and peasants.

Second, the notion that state and civil society are essentially locked in some sort of zero-sum game is especially limiting. Stepan's (1985, p. 318) specification of four

logical possibilities in the unfolding of power relations between state and civil society is worth reiterating: state power can be extended in zero-sum fashion to the detriment of civil society; power in both realms can be simultaneously expanded in a positive-sum game; power can simultaneously decline in both realms, in a negative-sum fashion; and finally, the power of civil society sectors can expand while those of the state decline. This schema runs counter to the popular view, derived from such diverse influences as modernisation and Marxist theory, which associates the advance of capitalist industrialisation with an inevitable extension of civil society. Yet it is more consistent with the diversity of political accommodations taking place in East and Southeast Asia to the social transformations accompanying industrialisation in the region. In Singapore, for instance, the last decade has witnessed the expansion of the reach of the state itself, not civil society, in response to these pressures. A host of new mechanisms have been developed to co-opt ethnic, business and social groups (Rodan, 1992).

Third, the connection between civil society and the state is stronger than the latter providing the legal framework for the former to exist. Political contestation - whether it be over the control of formal political institutions of the state or the attempt to influence these through interest groups or social movements - often centres around competing efforts to redress or consolidate relationships in civil society via the state. This might involve direct political action, or it may be directed through organised political parties. This relationship between the state and civil society has to some extent received attention from Held (1987), and Keane (1988), who have argued the case for the mutual 'democratisation' of state and civil society. Essentially, their point is that the independence of civil society is of limited value to reformers in pursuit of egalitarianism without breaking down elitist and unrepresentative structure embodied in the state. Yet these same structures resonate with, and shore up, the interests of other sections of civil society. The problem with the conception of civil society as the dichotomous opposite of the state, then, is that it downplays the co-operative and complementary relationship between elements of both that have shared objectives.

Fourth, there is a real danger that too sharp a delineation of state and society - and the related delineation of state and civil society - conceals important and interesting aspects of state-society relationships not easily handled within this dichotomous, zero-sum framework. In particular, the way in which societal forces have been incorporated or co-opted into some sort of relationship with state structures, though not always unproblematically for policy makers and officials of the state, demands careful analysis. The boundaries between state and civil society are greatly complicated by the existence of a host of institutional fora that attempt to incorporate social forces - regardless of whether these forms of representations are democratic. These structures are extensive in, but not exclusive of, East and Southeast Asia.

It is often the ability of regimes, especially but not only authoritarian regimes, to incorporate organised social forces that renders them so effective in political terms. But this effectiveness does not simply derive from the negation of an organisation's independence from the state or the obstruction of other organisations in society, important as both are. Rather, it lies also in the very fact of social organisation under the auspices of the state (Ding, 1994; Huang, 1993), some of which is willingly entertained. Depending on its nature, co-option can introduce important dynamics to the political process, including forms of contestation, that can affect the content of public policy.

There are thus various forms of political space, some more restrictive than others. The concept of civil society must be preserved for specifying a particular form of political space - the least restrictive. But the concept cannot include all, independent, voluntary social organisations, as some theorist maintain. Instead, a distinction must be drawn between civic and civil society, the latter involving regular attempts to advance the interests of members through overt political action. As Bernhard (1993, p. 308) emphasises, civil society requires "the existence of an independent public space from the exercise of state power, and then the ability of organisations within it to influence the exercise of state power." Seen in this way, civil society is an inherently political sphere, of no less significance than formal politics. Such a definition allows us to make qualitative distinctions between different sorts of non-government organisations. This point will be developed further below when we also see that amongst those organisations that do qualify as part of civil society, some are strategic for the consolidation and extension of this particular form of political space.

To summarise, the dominant understanding of civil society is imbued with a strong normative preference for a limited state. This tends to obscure the great diversity of social and political elements in civil society in favour of a general championing of civil society *per se*. Equally, it has fostered loose, inclusive conceptions of civil society that make insufficient distinction between the different non-state components of society - civic and civil society. An argument has thus been submitted for a sober recognition of civil society's complex and diverse make-up, including anti-democratic elements, and the adoption of a definition of civil society that stresses its political nature.

Let us now turn our attention to how this concept might assist in understanding of contemporary social and political developments in East and Southeast Asia. At one extreme of the related debates we have an expectation of an imminent and liberalising civil society as capitalist development gathers momentum. At the other extreme we have, in effect, the proposition that civil society - or at least a liberalising civil society - is culturally alien to Asia and must be avoided lest social discipline and economic development give way to chaos.



*Pressures for Political Pluralism and the Revival of "Asian Values"*

Dramatic economic development in much of East and Southeast Asia since the 1960s has set in train social transformations involving new centres of economic and political power, as well as new divisions and conflicts. This has translated into new pressures on authoritarian rule, not just from emerging business and middle classes seeking the greater institutionalisation of the rule of law, transparency in government and the curtailment of corruption, but also from organisations representing labour, women, environmentalists, and social justice and human rights activists. Broadly speaking, there has been an upsurge of political opposition, but significantly without the sort of strategic influence of communists, socialist and radicals that has characterised previous historical phases of opposition (See Hewison and Rodan, 1994). Certainly liberal democratic ideas feature prominently within the political philosophies and aspirations of many of these social forces, although they are one element of a wider complex. What is crucially important is that these social forces have agitated for the right to influence public policy. That has generally required some sort of reassessment of state-society relations by authoritarian leaders.

The complexion and strength of these pressures have obviously varied throughout East and Southeast Asia, as have the responses by authoritarian regimes facing such challenges. Thus, throughout the region we have witnessed a differential mix, importance and character to political parties, social movements, NGOs and organisations co-opted into some sort of political relationship with the state. We can expect the contrasting mixes in the forms and substances of these political opposition in each society to produce even more divergent political trajectories as capitalist industrialisation consolidates and reflects local constellations of social and economic power.

A major distinction is likely to be drawn, however, between societies in which changes in state-society relations permit significantly greater independent political space - where civil societies expand - and those where more extensive and ingenious forms of political co-option are devised. Clearly developments in Taiwan, South Korean and to a lesser extent Hong Kong have been much more facilitative of independent political spaces than Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, for example. In the former, interest groups representing labour, business and professionals, together with an assortment of social movements and NGOs are playing an increasingly active political role, in some respects surpassing political parties. By contrast, in the latter, what concessions have been made to political pluralism have often involved extensions to state structures themselves. This has taken quite elaborate form in Singapore to selectively sanction wider consultation with elements of the business and middle classes. Here the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is attempting to shore up elitism at the same time as it widens the incorporation of social forces into state structures (Rodan, 1992). But in Indonesia, recent labour strikes, as well as public demonstrations over press bans, serve as a reminder that, outside the city-state, the viability of corporatism is likely to be more fully tested.

Since the 1980s, the fortunes of authoritarian regimes have certainly suffered in the region, starting with the collapse of the Marcos regime in the Philippines and followed by the fall of military and civilian dictatorships in South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand. Events in 1989, culminating in the Tienanmen Square massacre, also underlined the more than residual opposition to authoritarian rule in China. Then, following 28 years of military dictatorship, in 1990 the National League for Democracy (NLD) had a landslide electoral victory in Burma. Despite tight controls on campaigning and the house arrest ten months earlier of its leaders, the NDL picked up 392 out of 485 seats while the pro-military National Unity Party won just ten seats. While the military prevented the elected leaders from taking office, this was another powerful rebuff for the idea that Asians have some cultural predisposition towards "strong government." Meanwhile, and in defiance of Chinese authorities preparing to regain sovereignty in mid-1997, elections in 1991 and 1995 in Hong Kong also appear to have whetted an appetite for greater political representation.

In these circumstances, it is understandable that authoritarian leaderships remaining in the region might feel a little nervous about the patterns of change around them and anxious to dissuade their own populations from emulating any of these experiences. This is the context in which a discourse about "Asian values" has surfaced which, in essence, portrays challenges to authoritarian rule emanating from civil society as culturally alien to Asia. Ironically, it is not that long ago that theorists were documenting what they saw as the impediments to modernisation presented by traditional cultures (See Finkle and Gable 1966), including "Asian values." It is even more ironic that for some of these writers the very diversity of Asian in social, political and cultural terms was part of the problem. Accordingly, Ho (1977, p. 13), for example, argued that:

It is therefore more appropriate to use the term 'Asian Values' to denote not a particular set of attitudes, beliefs and institutions which all Asian people share in common, but rather to refer to the great diversities which characterize Asian *values* as such, and which in the context of this discussion, pose serious difficulties to the task of modernizing Asia for social, economic and political development.

It was precisely this diversity which led John Steadman (1969) as early as 1969 to argue in *The Myth of Asia* that "The most obvious signs of unity in Asia are, paradoxically, those of Western influence."

The contemporary focus on "Asian values," however, not only attempts to distil essential cultural elements across the region, but puts a decidedly more favourable gloss on them. Thus we are told that such "Asian" cultural characteristics as group rather than individual orientation, the importance of the family, the propensity to adopt consensual rather than competitive decision-making processes, and emphasis on education and saving have underscored political stability and economic development (Hofheinz and Calder 1982; Lee Kuan Yew cited in Zakaria 1994; Mahathir and

Ishihara 1995; Mahbubani, 1995; Goh 1994; Berger and Hsiao, 1990; Koh 1993). While the particular combination of characteristics may vary from one account to another, the common theme to these portrayals is the notion that social and political organisation is hierarchical or controlled from above. Furthermore, this is presented as a natural state of affairs, since it is rooted in Asian culture. This "top down" model of social and political organisation infers at best a limited place for a civil society housing social groups or individuals that place demands on the political and social elite. Indeed, obligations to the state are stressed, thereby obviating the need for societal demands to be conveyed via independent organisations.

Adherents to the "Asian values" thesis both inside and outside East and Southeast Asia have tended to characterise Confucianism as the cultural underlay to these particular values, raising questions about where the non-ethnic Chinese communities fit in this schema. Significantly, the essentials of "Asian values" have been defined principally in opposition to what is commonly referred to as "Western liberalism" which is seen, amongst other things, to be characterised by excessive individualism and a propensity for protestation and open political conflict. The consistent reference to "Western liberalism" conveys the clear message that liberalism is an 'alien' set of social and political values for which "real" Asians have a cultural aversion.

The concerted attack on liberation reflects the fact that political forces in East and Southeast Asia have generally moderated, compared with previous attempts to carve out greater space for civil society. In the past, the spectre of communism or arguments about the primacy of initiating economic development have been drawn on to justify authoritarian rule and curtail political pluralism in much of the region. However, the social forces associated with the current push for political space, particularly from the middle and business classes, largely involve groups and individuals with a strong stake in the consolidation and deepening of capitalism. These challenges to authoritarian rule cannot be so easily dismissed, hence the new critical focus on liberalism and its juxtaposition with "Asian values." In this exercise, attempts to carve out civil society space are depicted as a mimic of foreign ideas, incompatible with the cultural basis of Asian polities and societies.

In emphasizing the utility of "Asian values" to the maintenance of authoritarian rule, it cannot be denied that there are other factors behind this turnaround in the meaning and application of "Asian values" since the heyday of modernisation theory. The intervening decades have witnessed significant changes, including rapid economic development and a favourable repositioning of Asia within the global political economy. Projections of an "Asian Century" abound. It is understandable that many people within these predominantly post-colonial societies should derive pride from this, not least leaders. Nor should we be surprised that greater institutionalisation of economic and political relationship in the region should ensue. Notions of an "Asian renaissance" and the recent establishment of the Commission for a New Asia (1994)

gives vivid expression to this changing mood. But we should be careful to distinguish the shared experience and consciousness of late but spectacular industrialisation from shared culture. Attempts to foster regional identity which promote the idea of cultural homogeneity will continue to confront a complex reality and invite observations like that of former Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry (MITI) official, Naohiro Amaya. According to him, "Asia' is a geographical word. Asian nations share nothing in common" (Cited in Jameson, 1992).

### *Beyond Elite Culture in Asia*

The attempts to articulate "Asian values" has relied heavily on liberalism as a point of departure and has been deficient in specifying the positive, definitive characteristics of "Asian culture" that permeate social and political organisations in the region. This is not so surprising, given that the region is comprised of a series of adapted systems fundamentally shaped by liberal democratic and communist ideas. Any attempts to identify the "consensual Asian" form of government runs into this problem (Mallet, 1994). The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the region's most vocal and influential proponents of "Asian values" have had to embark on something of a cultural rediscovery themselves to address this issue. It is an acute irony that Singapore's most Western-educated elite are at the pivot of the campaign for "Asian values." Apart from Lee Kuan Yew, this included Goh Chok Tong, Kishore Mahbubani, Chan Heng Chee, Tommy Koh, George Yeo and Bilahari Kausikan. Yet in the 1980s, when the PAP government decided to introduce Confucianism into the secondary education syllabus, this was only possible with the help of outside experts. The atmosphere has certainly changed. During the 1960s and 1970s, when the opposition political party Barisan Sosialis had significant support amongst those educated in the Chinese language medium, the PAP was particularly vigilant against anything roughly approximating Chinese chauvinism (See Bloodworth, 1986).

To the extent that "Asian values" have been appropriated in reaction to the perceived threat of liberalism, the absence of real definition to the alternative Asian model is not a fundamental problem. Indeed, from a political and ideological point of view it is paramount that the notion be retained at as abstract and vague a level as possible. Nevertheless, this does produce some interesting ambiguities and contradictions. Take for instance Lee Kuan Yew's position on the liberal democratic notion of the separation of powers. This is one of the fundamental ingredients of liberal democracy, but not one ever claimed as central to "Asian values." Indeed, recently the Mayor of Seoul, Dr Cho Soon (Cited in Australian, 15 Nov. 1995, p. 15) argued that the traditional absence of this concept in Asian necessarily meant that the development of democracy in the region could not replicate Western experience. Yet, as international newspaper proprietors have discovered to their considerable cost,

nothing is more likely to provoke the authorities in Singapore than to cast doubts on the independence of the judiciary from the executive. Yet surely there are a host of plausible political arguments for not placing central importance on the separation of powers if you feel no compunction to defend liberalism and are confident about a defensible political alternative.

This uncertainty about what actually constitutes the "Asian alternative" underlines that the principal dynamic behind the revival of "Asian values" by authoritarian leaders is to negate the perceived appeal of liberalism within Asia. Not surprisingly, then, these leaders find themselves not just at odds with other Asians who reject the attempt to depict their views as "alien," but also with those who take seriously the question of how cultural heritages in Asia shape contemporary possibilities. In a recent lecture in Singapore by Professor Tu Wei-ming of Harvard University, one of those experts who had earlier been consulted by Singapore's authorities on Confucianism, he raised very serious doubts even about the validity of Confucianism as the basis of critique of "the West." To be relevant today, Tu argues, Confucian tradition needs to be creatively transformed by some of the values of the European Enlightenment, including human rights, freedom, liberty and due process of law. If this can be achieved, without sacrificing such spiritual resources as family cohesion and respect for elders, then Tu believed Confucianists would then, and only then, have earned "the right and responsibility to be critical of excessive individualism, litigiousness and social disintegration" (Cited in *Straits Times*, 22 Mar. p. 22, 1995).

A more direct refutation of the attempt to harness Confucianism and Asian cultural traditions to an attack on liberalism has been undertaken by other Asian political figures themselves. Indeed, former presidential candidate and leading dissident and human rights campaigner in South Korea, Kim Dae Jung, has turned the argument on its head. In an explicit response to Lee Kuan Yew's published views in the American journal *Foreign Affairs*, Kim (1994) argues that democracy has deep roots in Asian cultures and philosophies, including the works of Confucius, Lao-tzu and Mencius. In China and Korea, a county prefecture system had been in place for 2,000 years when Western societies were still being ruled by feudal lords. Far from Asia's cultural traditions obstructing liberal democracy, Kim maintains they contain the intellectual ideological bases for a major contribution to a new "global democracy."

Kim's high profile, like that of President Ramos of the Philippines, who has also clashed with Lee Kuan Yew over the latter's anti-democratic prescriptions for the region [See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 Dec. 1992, p. 29, and Hong Kong human rights campaigner and Legislative Councilor Christine Loh (1993)], gives these intra-Asian disputations a certain visibility. However, there also exists a range of other oppositions within Asia to the "Asian values" thesis. Take, for example, the issue of human rights. The position adopted by Asian governments in The Bangkok

Declaration in March 1993, prior to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, emphasised the importance of historical, cultural and regional specificities in the interpretation of human rights (See Freeman, 1995). This amounted to a serious qualification to the idea of human rights as universal, and included arguments about the importance of social stability and economic development rather than abstract individual freedoms as the primary basis of gauging human rights. The message was clear: the West should not try to impose its culturally-specific standards on other countries.

Regional NGOs responded immediately to re-assert the universality of human rights across cultures (See Ghai 1995; Muntarbhorn, 1993). In July the following year, and despite the efforts of Thai authorities to jettison the gathering (See *Thai Development News* no. 25, 1994, p. 68-70), the *Southeast Asian NGOs Forum on Human Rights and Development* in Bangkok issued a further statement which extended the challenge to regional governments on human rights. The statement included condemnation of the repressive State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in Burma and the occupation of East Timor by Indonesian authorities. Moreover, while these NGOs accepted the importance of linking human rights with social and economic rights, as the Asean governments had earlier insisted, they drew on this principle to call for more equitable distribution of income, environmentally-sustainable development, and the removal of gender discrimination. Clearly, within the region there are individuals and groups who see a case for critically evaluating the liberal concept of human rights, but as a basis for social and economic reform agendas few authoritarian regimes would welcome. Indeed, as Ghai (1995, p. 64-5) has argued, the sensitivity of authorities in Asia to debate over human rights is grounded on concern about the potential of this to question the structures of power and authority embedded in material disparities, corruption, the influence of international capital and other objects of popular animosity.

The attempt by authoritarian leaders in Asia, then, to dismiss dissenting views on human rights on the basis that they simply echo mainstream "Western liberal" opinion does not hold up to scrutiny. Liberalism is a significant political force in the region and, as the formation in 1994 of both the Forum of Democratic Leaders in the Asian Pacific (FDL-AP) and the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD) illustrates, it has the potential to assume more formal networks across the region. However, other challenges to authoritarian rule exist, inspired by notions of democracy and development that go beyond liberal individualism. Various NGOs involved in social and economic development throughout much of Asia involve efforts to promote participatory democracy (See Clark, 1991; Hewison 1991; Eldridge, 1995). In the endeavour to sustain local communities, economic and political decentralisation is a priority for many in Asia. As Callahan (1994) points out, there are grassroots alternatives to the notions of "Asian democracy" propagated by elites which draw on local knowledge and traditions in Asia.

Illustrating this point, Aung San Suu Kyi (1994) - one of Asia's most popular political figures - insists that democracy takes a variety of forms and should not simply be equated with one dominant form. Indeed, even in the West the forms vary significantly, and we should expect the same in Asia. However, this cannot be used to justify authoritarian rule. Rather, she contends that "People's participation in social and political transformation is the central issue of our time." Moreover, Aung's critique of what Lee Kuan Yew and other proponents of "Asian values" would regard as 'Western decadence' is seen in very different terms:

Many of the worst ills of American society, increasingly to be found in other developed countries, can be traced not to the democratic legacy but to the demands of modern materialism. Gross individuals and cut-throat morality arise when political and intellectual freedoms are curbed on the one hand while on the other fierce economic competitiveness is encouraged by making material success the measure of prestige and progress.

Such a critique has obvious relevance for much of Asia where economic individualism generally faces less constraints than in established liberal democracies in which environmental groups and others exert a general influence to protect wider community interests. The philosophical contrast between Aung and Lee is a dramatic but nevertheless poignant reminder of the diversity that the "Asian values" generalisations obscure. Such authentic expressions of Asian opinion obviously pose a special problem for the credibility of "Asian values."

The point of the above is not to establish the 'real' Asian values but to instead emphasise there are a number of different political voices in Asia. The advocates of the "Asian values" thesis are correct in claiming connections between the ideas within Asia that reject this thesis and ideas within the West. But this is no less true of the ideas encapsulated in "Asian values." The views championed by advocates of "Asian Values" are not an "Asian alternative" to "Western liberalism" but an "alternative in Asia" to liberalism. As will be explained below, the same attacks on liberalism can be found in the West itself.

#### *Support in the West for "Asian Values"*

Of no less importance in this "Asian values" rhetoric is the depiction on liberalism as absolutely and equally ascendant throughout "the West." Yet behind this convenient monolith, there are considerable differences in the constellation and strength of political forces and ideas from American to Europe, for example, which pose varying domestic challenges to liberalism and incite serious debates over the nature of liberalism itself among its supporters. At their core, these challenges and debates centre around the fundamental and unresolved disputes over the relative rights and responsibilities of individuals and the state: precisely the same set of question underlying political and ideological contestation in Asia today and embodied in the content of "Asian values." It is linking up of ideological forces across "East" and

"West" in the prosecution of positions taken in these fundamental disputes, not a clash of cultures, which is unfolding. Critical in this is an amalgam of conservative and neo-liberal forces seeking in the West to reverse a range of social and political reforms of the post-War period that resulted from certain social democratic and liberal pressures (Rodan 1995).

The integration of Asia into domestic ideological and political battles in the established liberal democracies has gathered momentum as the economic fortunes of the former increasingly stand in sharp contrast with those of the latter. Some observers, like American economist Paul Krugman (1995), have argued that this will prove a short-lived growth spurt owing to structural limitations to these Asian economies. Whether this argument holds or not, it has understandable appeal, particularly for those theorists who view political liberty as a functional requirement of sophisticated capitalist development. But a host of policymakers and academics have come to the conclusion that the competitiveness of the "Asia model" simply compels some pragmatic adjustments in 'the West', neo-liberals and conservatives have ready-made solutions which resonate with various "Asian values," Gellner (1994) quite explicitly makes the point that a modern, industrialized society can not only exist without a civil society, but it can indeed flourish.

The discourse of "Asian values" also provides a tempting rationale for governments and their bureaucrats, anxious to extend economic relations with Asia, moderating public positions on human rights in an attempt to avoid diplomatic friction. Academics with specialist knowledge about Asian cultures can also feel empowered by the opportunity to "unlock the mysteries of the East" that this debate presents. And there are assorted radicals whose animosity towards imperialism leads them also to sympathise with attacks on "the West" (See Robison 1993). So there are a variety of seductions in "Asian values" outside the region.

This harnessing of the "Asian values" debate to domestic politics has been quite explicit in Australia where, for the last decade, economic restructuring has been closely tied to the idea of economic relations with Asia. A variety of politicians, journalists, business leaders, academics, judges and other prominent figures have weighed in with recommendations on how Australian society needs to be reformed in response to, or emulation of, Asian development (See Rodan and Hewison 1996). Increasingly, the same process is reflected in the United States, Britain and Europe. Recently, the Chairman of the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, the Conservative Party's David Howell, gave one of the most direct and comprehensive such statements in alerting Europeans to imminent "Easternisation." According to Howell (1995), this is "not just about adopting the business techniques of those now in the ascendant, the Asian dynamos, but about some of the values and attitudes which lie beneath their success both as economies and societies." Not surprisingly, this leads amongst other things to the endorsement of "the greater security which flows families and neighbourhoods" ahead of the welfare state (Ibid.).



The point is that much of the force behind the "Asian values" debate stems precisely from the fact that these values have international, trans-cultural meaning and appeal. Without a recognition that these values, resonate with ideologies and interests outside the region, it would be difficult to understand why such thoroughly "Westernized" proponents of these values as Lee Kuan Yew would not have their credentials to speak on behalf of "Asia" more seriously scrutinized if not dismissed. So notions of "Asian values" are not only being deployed in an attempt to marginalise, if not obstruct, emerging political oppositions within much of Asia. They are also incorporated into established liberal democracies in the ongoing battle for ideological ascendancy between competing liberal, conservative and social democratic forces. It is this combined political significance of "Asian values" that makes it so influential and important a debate, and that also exposes as myth the proposition that such values are culturally distinct.

#### *Changing State-Society Relations in Southeast Asia*

Having made the points that there is no endemic cultural aversion to civil society in Asia and the civil society has enjoyed relative prosperity at previous points in the histories of East and Southeast Asia, this is not to suggest that it will inevitably flourish as capitalist revolutions consolidate. Nevertheless, complex social transformations associated with capitalist development do necessitate political changes to state-society relations. The increasingly numerous and differentiated middle class, which encompasses a range of professionals, public and private bureaucrats and the self-employed is a major dimension of this. So too is the development of business classes involving more diverse and sophisticated domestic and global accumulations strategies. The expansion of wage labour is a further aspect of these social transformations beginning to assert itself in some cases. Such new interests and identities are manifesting in pressures for influence over the policy process, as well as precipitating new tensions involving social groups and classes adversely affected by changing pattern of social and economic power.

An expanded civil society is one possible scenario to accommodate this, though clearly not the one preferred by authoritarian leaders in Southeast Asia who look askance at recent directions in South Korea, Taiwan or even Hong Kong. To differing extents, alongside the growth in political parties in these three East Asian societies, independent trade unions, interest groups and/or non-government organisations are exerting a significant influence over the political process. If civil society is to be resisted in Southeast Asia, other forms of social and political organisation which do not involve the same measure of independence from the state must be effectively institutionalised. But while governments in most of Southeast Asia may share a preference for resisting the expansion and diversification of civil society, the capacities to do this are not uniform. The brief and selective examination of this question below not only makes this point, but underlines that where any significant concessions are being made to greater independent political space this has essentially involved comparatively privileged elements of society.

At one extreme of the spectrum in Southeast Asia we have Singapore. Here, new mechanisms have been developed to widen the structures of co-option, but on a very selective basis. A variety of institutional arrangements facilitate consultation with professionals, business groups and ethnic organizations in the public policy process, including the appointment of nominated members of parliament (NMPs), wider use of parliamentary committees and a government-sponsored think tank. Significantly, though, this consultation is depicted by authorities as a functional process which draws on expertise. It is sharply contrasted with the sanctioning of interest-based politics. Probably the only significant exception to this pattern of the state extending its umbrella to rein in more of society involve the Nature Society of Singapore and the Association of Women for Action and Research. These small non-government organizations (NGOs), both dominated by cautious middle class activists with politically moderate objectives have been able to enter the political process in a limited way.

Meanwhile, avenues for organised, independent political contestation by, and on behalf of, the under-privileged in Singapore remain extremely difficult, not the least through fear of enforcement of the Societies Act which bars engagement in 'politics' by organisations not registered for such a purpose. Attempts by lay religious organizations in the late 1980s represent the interests and concerns of guest workers was enough to precipitate an extensive internal security crackdown. The government-controlled National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) remains the fundamental voice of labour. Consequently, growing concerns over the last decade about widening material inequalities may have translated into greater electoral support for the PAP's formal political opponents, but these parties cannot draw on, or connect with, independent social organisations with complementary reform agendas. This is the fundamental limitation of electoral politics: its severing from any organic connection with civil society.

Beyond the small city state, the constraints on independent political activity are not quite as effective or complete, although co-option of emerging social forces is also a dominant theme. In particular, since the mid-1980s Southeast Asia has witnessed the rapid expansion of business and professional organizations. In Indonesia and Thailand, at least, some of these groups have achieved considerable power. MacIntyre (1991) has demonstrated how industry associations and business groups have been able to use the Indonesian state's corporatist structures to derive benefits for their members. This, he argues, effectively amounts to expanded political representation. Anek (1992) also maintains that, in the Thailand case, business associations have become autonomous of the state, acting as interest groups, even if there are "close and supportive relations between the government and organized business."

The point such developments underline is that, whether it takes the form of opening up civil society or extending the state's structures of co-option, any increased political representation that has taken place has been occurring on a selective basis. It has generally excluded the underprivileged. However, the extension of the market

economy within Southeast Asia and the unequal social and economic effects of it are likely to increasingly generate pressure for the protection and advancement of disadvantaged social groups. Yet, as a legacy of decades of authoritarian rule, the institutionalised incorporation of organised labour into the structures of the state is well advanced throughout Southeast Asia. The under-privileged - who are not always wage labourers but can also include peasants, merchants and various categories of self-employed-therefore have to look for other groups to represent their interests. Thus, either in conjunction with, or in place of, trade unions, NGOs engaged in social and economic development and, to a lesser extent, social movements have emerged as significant political influences in the region.

The roles of developmental NGOs in Southeast Asia vary, from high profile activism in the Philippines and Thailand to a more moderate role in Indonesia and Malaysia. limited in Singapore, and virtually non-existent in Burma and Laos. Moreover, as some analysts have pointed out (See Kothari, 1989; Sasono, 1989; Rahnama, 1989), many so-called NGOs engaged in social and economic development in the region have either been co-opted by government or are self-promoting or self-interested. However, in view of the tight clamp on overtly political activities and the very nature of work undertaken by many of these organizations, they have come to assume an important unofficial political function. The personnel of such organizations are mostly drawn from urban intellectuals and middle class groups. But, as Sasono (1989, p. 19) points out these people nevertheless act in a class-based manner, working for the poor, and taking risks, knowing the political and economic costs involved. A new NGO ideology has evolved out of their work. Many have learnt that development practice cannot be neutral and that empowerment of the poor, disorganised and disenfranchised is the key to 'real' development. In addition, poverty has been defined as a political issue, since poverty has a lot to do with powerlessness. Many working in these NGOs have concluded that development projects are more successful 'if they are based on people's own analysis of the problems they face and their solutions' (Clark, 1991, p. 102).

In essence, this suggests an approach to participation, representation and collective action, where political action on a national or even international stage is necessary. This challenges the elitist ideology of meritocracy, so powerful in the Singapore case, which is used to justify selective functional representation in the political process to those with expertise. It also makes it imperative for such NGOs to try and expand political space. In Southeast Asia this has involved the building of coalitions with religious and women's groups, environmentalist, trade unions and others in attempts to shape public policy.

This last observation leads to the point that, despite the continued difficulties for independent trade unions throughout Southeast Asia, they have not been completely blunted. Rising labour activism in Indonesia attests to this, with trade unions like the PPBI (Center for Working Class Struggles) and the SBSI (Indonesia Prosperous Workers' Union) playing a critical role. Importantly, though, this has been one

component of an increasing breadth of oppositional forces, particularly within Indonesia but generally throughout the region. Growing links between the student and labour movements in Indonesia are expressed through the activities of such organisations as the PPBI and the YMB (Foundation for Mutual Progress) for example. Together with developmental NGOs like the SISBIKUM and YAKOMA they complicate the New Order's corporatist designs for labour, albeit under constant threat of repressive reprisals from the state. The student movement in Indonesia, whose potential ranks are bolstered by the expansion of the middle class, is also integrating itself with peasant organizations via a range of NGOs involved in social and economic development. But if the urban middle class in Indonesia is increasingly forming political coalitions with less privileged sectors, and even playing a strategic role in this coalition, these links are nevertheless still ad hoc, often clandestine, and insecure.

In neighbouring Malaysia, while a comparable alliance between the student and labour movements is absent, the urban middle class is however a limited force for the broadening of political contestation. Here we see significant middle class involvement and leadership in what attempts have been to open up the space of civil society. Lawyers and other professionals have attempted to advance concern about civil rights, environmental degradation, women's rights, corruption, and the social consequences of economic development. Prominent independent organisations trying to influence public policy, wherein the middle class plays a strategic role, include Aliran, the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia, Selangor Graduates Society, Consumer Association of Penang, National Council of Women's Organisations, and the Association of Women Lawyers.

Recent Southeast Asian history contains some striking illustrations of the potential for NGOs to play decisive political roles when circumstances are favourable. In Thailand, for example, NGOs played leading and coordinating roles in the events of 1991 and 1992 which eventually led to the demise of a military government. Earlier, in 1986, NGOs played a similar role in overthrowing the Marcos regime. Notwithstanding this, alongside the much more extensive NGOs in South Korea and Taiwan, where there has been a flowering of social movements, NGO structures are modest. In both these East Asian societies, consumer, environmental, human rights, women's student, and social justice movements have fuelled remarkable social and political dynamics. Between 1990 and 1995, hundreds of NGOs emerged in South Korea and there are now more than twenty environmental organizations alone. Significantly, in both South Korea and Taiwan, these important organizations in the mobilization of popular opinion have eschewed links with political parties, even though the latter have a more important role to play in the competition for power than their counterparts in Southeast Asia. So the sharp separation of party politics from broader social and political life is a feature across East and Southeast Asia.

The point to emphasize here, however, is that while NGOs and social movements may be less influential in Southeast Asia, they nevertheless are in existence and they may yet have a greater impact if the assorted mechanisms of co-optation fail in their political accommodation of new and more diversified social forces. Furthermore, as capitalist industrialization advances in Southeast Asia, issues relating to income distribution, pollution, public transport and other social infrastructure are likely to loom larger. It remains to be seen how effective corporatist structures will be in satisfactorily defusing these issues. At the very least, it would seem that structures to actually ascertain diverse social opinion are necessary to give any semblance of credibility to the idea by authoritarian leaders that public policy is arrived at by consensus rather than contestation. This in itself would involve significant political change.

### *Conclusion*

For historical reasons, social, political and economic developments in Southeast Asia necessarily contrast in certain respects from the processes that accompanied development in the earlier industrializers of the established liberal democracies. But claims that Asian cultural predispositions render competitive political processes unworkable in East and Southeast Asia are a different matter. Such claims must themselves be put in historical context - a context of growing and increasingly complex political pressures on authoritarian structures in East and Southeast Asia. In the past, tight political controls were rationalised by authoritarian leaderships in much of developing Asia as a necessary temporary trade-off to enable economic development to take root. But with the economic transformation of Asia, this argument is much less tenable, especially as it has brought with it greater social complexity and associated pressures for political pluralism. Changes of some form or degree in state-society relations are thus inevitable.

Yet these pressures comprise diverse social groups and political aspirations, not all of which lead in the direction of liberal democracy or a liberal civil society. Thus, authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia may be able to reach political accommodations with some groups - either by extending the mechanisms of state co-optation or by selectively opening up the space of civil society - without fundamental changes to authoritarian rule. Wider political participation could be reconciled with the consolidation of hierarchical and elitist political structures. In this scenario, major sections of society would remain politically marginalized.

Indications are, however, that throughout Southeast Asia the state corporatist direction is likely to face challenges. A variety of non-government organizations are emerging, including organizations that actively promote the interests of social groups adversely affected by the inequalities of the market economy. Their continued exclusion from the political process - even from co-optation - undermines claims of an

'Asian' alternative to liberal democracy based on consensual politics. More importantly, it remains to be seen whether this sort of exclusion will prove politically effective over the longer term as the capitalist revolution in Southeast Asia matures. In contrast with the notion of an 'Asian' alternative, it is likely that there will be increased differentiation in the nature of state-society relations across the region. Central in this will be the relative margin and character of civil society. Authoritarian rule is by no means a necessary casualty of advanced capitalist development, but growing social complexity and the inescapable social frictions of market economies will at least compel a commensurate increase in its political sophistication if it is to survive.

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