

## **Transnational Ideas and Connections**

### Understanding Asian Civil Society Activism<sup>1</sup>

Whether one looks back at armed insurgency movements, the Philippines' People Power, or Jakarta's riots against Suharto, transnational ideas, models of collective action, and activists have been keys in inspiring and fostering civil society mobilization and organizations in Southeast Asia. What are some of the common characteristics of Asian civil society activism, and what are some of the differences? Can we explain these similitudes and differences across countries, especially within Southeast Asia? Are there themes for activism that are more dominant than others? To answer these questions, we first undertook a short historical and comparative review of social activism in the region before conducting a preliminary analysis of a database on NGOs, networks, and coalitions in various Southeast Asian countries. Our results seem to show that national organizations tend to be influenced by agenda setting on the part of regional organizations, to the point where it might trump the importance of national/local issues, such as the regime type, and might homogenize the issues on which organizations work across countries. At the same time, national/local animosities also influence regional organizations, whether they want it or not. In sum, regional and national organizations shape each other, and that the influence is far from going only in one single direction.

## INTRODUCTION

At the 6th World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong in December 2005, a multitude of organizations, delegations, marches, flags, and banners occupied what is considered one of the cores of Asian capitalism. The world suddenly discovered a militancy that was effervescent and partly distinctive from the other major demonstrations that took place at previous WTO meetings. In fact, this reflection among the alter-globalization<sup>2</sup> movement had already intensified the previous year at the 4th World Social Forum (WSF) which took place in Mumbai, India, in January 2004.

The 4th WSF is still recalled as a particular one among the few WSFs. First, there were an astonishing number of participants—over 100,000 (Caouette 2010a). Second, there was massive “dalit” participation. Dalits, also called Untouchables, are a heterogeneous ensemble of social and cultural groups considered to be at the bottom of the Hindu cast system. Furthermore, the WSF, initially organized as a Davos counter-forum, was also confronted by its own counter-forums: an alternative forum called “Mumbai Resistance,” and two parallel conventions which were critical of the WSF for being too moderate and reformist. This was not new, as something similar had happened almost ten years before when the Asia Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) was held in the Philippines in November 1996. In fact, when the Philippines hosted the 8th APEC Annual Summit, at least five different parallel and counter-summits were organized, including the Manila’s People’s Forum, the People’s Conference Against Imperialist Globalization, and the Asia-Pacific Initiative for Sustainable Development. Each reflected the approaches of different elements of the burgeoning anti-globalization movement in the Philippines, and their different positions on whether to resist, reject, or reform the APEC process.

What are some of the common characteristics of Asian civil society activism, and what are some of the differences? Can we explain these similitudes and differences across countries, especially within Southeast Asia? Are there themes for activism that are more dominant than others?

Given the size and diversity of Asia as a region, we will try to address these questions by focusing more specifically on Southeast Asia. In the first part, using a historical lens, we provide an overview of the similarities and differences between organizations across countries

in Southeast Asia. We also highlight the main sectors on which Southeast Asian activists work. In the second part, we explore different research avenues. Our first area of empirical research is to identify the factors that condition and determine the type of issue on which national civil society groups focus their project and advocacy activities. First, we suggest that that nature of the political regime—in particular, changes towards political liberalization—helps in understanding the choices by civil society organizations. The intuition behind this claim is that authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes will often prevent national organizations from working on issues that can be perceived as a direct threat to the regime, such as democratization, election watch, and freedom of expression. In such countries, we would expect national organizations mainly to concentrate their work on issues related to economic development and basic services and lesser politically sensitive issues. Our second intuition is that civil society organizations that work and operate on a regional level (i.e., more than one country) influence the choice and areas of work of national organization. These organizations can provide intellectual leadership, expertise, and resources (Caouette 2006) that can condition the sectors of work chosen by national civil society activists. The logic here is that regional NGOs act as agenda setters for national organizations.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, such as the Asia Foundation, its influence is more directly related to its funding capacities. The third argument we wish to explore is that regime type also influences the form of activism adopted in a country. In semi-democratic regimes, looser forms of organization—such as networks, coalitions, and social movements—might be preferred by local activists over the creation of NGOs, since the latter can more easily be targeted by the state. Thus in more democratic regimes, we expect activists to organize more around NGOs than semi-democratic regimes.

We are quite aware that this is an exploratory article that aims to define a research agenda on NGO, civil society organizations, and activism within Southeast Asia. Our data collection for the project on which this article was based is still being completed.<sup>4</sup> The objective of this article is not to offer conclusive answers but to offer some insights and research avenues based on our preliminary findings. Our hope is that the discussion will contribute to a growing body of work on civil society activism in Asia (Piper and Uhlin 2004; Loh 2004; Boudreau 2004; Li 2007; Weiss 2006, 2008; Ford 2013) and serve as an incentive for others to do further research in this area of investigation.

## ACTIVISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

### SOURCES OF SIMILARITIES FOR MOVEMENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Throughout South, Southeast, and East Asia, as in many other regions of the world, there is a growing tendency to organize and work around objectives, values, and forms of collective action characteristic of alter-globalization (Loh 2004; Piper and Uhlin 2004; Caouette 2006; Barria 2008). Emphasis is placed on horizontalism, direct participation, participatory democracy, and the plurality and diversity of the forms of political and social expressions. It is now recognized that there exists various militant transnational organizations, movements, and networks based and active in Southeast and East Asia. Activism, especially anti-globalization, is both a response to the global socioeconomic and political processes related to globalization, and a consequence of the relative and limited political liberalization characterizing certain states of the region. But it is still necessary to grasp its contours.

In the region, anti-globalization movements seem to emerge from a sudden awareness among Asian activists that they confront common problems and challenges (Loh 2004; Caouette 2007). It is therefore unsurprising that they develop common resistance strategies. For many activists, anti-(alter)globalization appears like an innovative alternative in the context of the states of the region opening their economies and, in the majority of cases, subscribing to neoliberal policies and redefining the equilibrium between local and national politics. Activist movements often organize themselves around the construction of transnational coalitions or networks; for example, the Asia Pacific Research Network, the Asia Pacific Convention on People's Food Sovereignty, the Asian Peace Alliance, and the Migrant Forum in Asia (Caouette 2006).

In some cases, activism is being regionalized or transnationalized to broaden the political pressure in relation to a common problem: marginalization of rural sectors, trade liberalization and privatization, militarism, exclusion of indigenous peoples, etc. Moreover, the different forms that alter-globalization activism takes generate shared identities that often result from the same understanding of problems. From this shared understanding, common campaigns and propositions are put forward at regional and international meetings and implemented on both regional and national levels.

## SOURCES OF DIFFERENCES FOR MOVEMENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

While movements and organizations in Southeast Asia can have a lot in common across countries, such as common targets and strategies, as it was explained above, they also show significant differences. It is necessary to understand the specificities of the region to elaborate on Asian activism. The first source of such differences is the variety of political regimes from state socialism in Vietnam, to semi-democratic regimes in Malaysia and Singapore, and more democratic countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia (Boudreau 2004; Kuhonta 2011; Ford 2013). The latter can claim today to have militant and open civil societies, although the military regime or dictatorial years were defined by relatively secretive organizations or organizations under the umbrella of religious institutions. Therefore, different contexts, such as Thailand's authoritative periods or years of military power in Burma, entail that the alter-globalization movement constituted itself in a multitude of circumstances.

Coalitions and networks such as those mentioned in the previous section are instrumental in moving forward citizens' rights, in certain countries where advancement has been halted or that cannot be directly defended on the national scene. It is thus likely that focusing on an international target, outside of national politics, might help organizations perform their work in authoritarian and semi-democratic contexts. This is why we initially expected the regime type to have an influence on the type of work organizations perform. The fact that coalitions and networks might be harder to target for authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes also explains why we decided to see if the regime type has an influence on the type of organizations present in a country.

A second important source of differences across movements and organizations is the particular role of different religious identities that coexist not only among the different states of the region but within them as well (Sidel 2006). Thus we should underline that Indonesia holds the largest Muslim population in the world, and that several important religions cohabit in the Philippines and Singapore. These multiple religious identities are an important factor in the formation of social movements in each of the countries, and they are illustrative of the great ethnic and cultural diversity of the Southeast Asian region. In the Philippines alone, over eighty-three languages and

dialects are spoken. In Indonesia, there are a few hundreds. In this polyglot context, much of the activism done outside of the country is in English. Therefore, a vast majority of the documents, publications or forum declarations published by activist organizations are written in English. One would then expect that countries where English is widely spoken as second language would be likely to host regional networks and organizations, such as Malaysia and the Philippines.

Another essential element that allows us to explain the variety of activist movements of the region is the dynamic of the interactions between local and transnational activism. Since organizations tend to be active on multiple levels, or related to organizations on multiple levels, the intersections created between local and regional dynamics should tend to be quite unique. Most transnational activists (that are operating beyond the boundaries of a single nation-state) started their activism on a local or national level. Many have remained linked to their national struggles, arguing that their commitment on a regional level does not inhibit them from being engaged on another level. In fact, in most cases, activists are able and interested in partnering and creating coalitions with different types of actors on different levels (local, national, regional, international). This allows them to react to various political contexts and, for each, to offer different political possibilities.

## ACTIVISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: ORIGINS AND NATIONAL VARIATIONS

Looking at the history of activism in the region further helps understand the similarities organizations in various countries might show (Ford 2013). Historically, it is possible to suggest that Asian activism is in many ways a product of the Cold War era, and originates from the political movements that opposed authoritarianism and from the political struggles in favor of democracy and peace. In Southeast Asia, the historical roots of an important number of organizations and militant trajectories can be traced back to struggles for political democracy and the end of authoritarianism.

On this subject, the example of the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA) is instructive. ARENA was founded in 1980 after discussions between academics and active religious communities' members. At the time, all agreed that it was impossible

to conduct critical research in many of the region's universities. The objective of ARENA is therefore to regroup "intellectual activists" wanting to collaborate for the production of research results and of concepts relevant to social movements in Asia. Since its creation, ARENA sought to use a pan-Asian approach to gather academics, intellectuals, activists, writers, and artists involved in various civil society organizations.

A different stage for the emergence or continuation in the history of activism in Southeast Asia—not linked to the Cold War or anti-dictatorship movements—is related to the nature of the development paradigm. Indeed, the effects and contradictions of economic growth in Asia are another explanatory factor of the development of contemporary activism, particularly after the 1997 financial crisis (Loh 2004). The problems related to economic growth have influenced the development of activism in the region, and the financial crisis, more specifically, has led to a new phase of middle-class mobilization. After the crisis, the model of economic development adopted by the Asian Tigers (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines) and previously by the Asian Dragons (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) was heavily questioned. States had suggested and conducted the strategy of integrating the world economy, but with the crisis, it appeared to be a dangerous dead-end that threatened the political and economic sovereignty of states.

This financial crisis was a catalyst. Starting at the end of the 1990s, a new phase of middle-class mobilization started in these countries. This mobilization was often centered around NGOs that logistically supported the emerging Asian anti/alter-globalization movements. The founding of militant groupings, of NGOs, and of regional networks for advocacy—like Focus on the Global South and the Asia-Pacific Research Network—marked the emergence of a global politics of civil society pressure. This pressure is exercised in relation to common problems affecting a large part of the population: growing poverty, marginalization of rural sectors, privatization of public services, trade liberalization, deregulation, militarization, etc. And these common problems facilitated a transnationalization of activism. For example, the activists from the Third World Network (TWN) tried to articulate propositions that could be alternatives to the orthodox neoliberal agenda, considered as key factors of the crisis (Caouette 2006). As Asia was integrating the world economy and as each state of the region was affected by world processes, activism transnationalized itself.



NGOs and other civil society organizations were not new to the region. A first generation of NGOs appeared in the 1970s in the context of emergent authoritarian regimes and the implementation of martial laws. This generation advocated for the defense of civil liberties as well as for more inclusive economic development policies. Under the influence of the Western world and of new social movements (feminist, pacifist, environmental, etc.), the formation of a vast array of NGOs took speed in the 1980s and even more in the 1990s, and led to the emergence of a second generation of NGOs. They were financially supported by northern countries and were reinforced by the middle classes becoming increasingly critical of the state policies that led to the crisis (Caouette 2006; Piper and Uhlin 2004).

Today, Southeast Asia is host to an impressive number of NGOs, networks, social coalitions, and think tanks (Piper and Uhlin 2004; Ford 2013). Two major axes guide their work and intervention in the region (Loh 2004). The first is the emphasis placed on consumption and economic development issues rather than on democratization. This axis is characteristic of NGOs in Singapore and Malaysia. How to make sure that the authoritarian state implements policies that ensure an increase of wealth and its redistribution, while at the same time making sure that the social, public health, and development aspects are taken into account? The second axis is articulated around demands for political and social participation through a growing democratization of the public sphere. This axis is adopted by NGOs from the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, which face repressive or arbitrary regimes. Simply put, according to the type of political regime, NGOs adopt one of two strategies. If the regime is semi-democratic, they are more likely to focus on consumption and development issues, not democracy. If it is democratic, they do demand greater political and social participation. Again, this reflection is part of what led us to consider that testing for the influence of the regime type on NGOs' sectors of work was important. To better understand how this movement of NGOs develops and deploys itself, it is useful to identify its characteristics in four states affected by the 1997 financial crisis and where NGOs are most present: the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

**Philippines.** The Philippines stands out from the rest of the region's countries because of the number and diversity of its NGOs. The estimated number of NGOs, taking all categories into account, was already 70,000 in 1995 (Loh 2004). Most of them offered services



in the poorest urban and rural areas such as support for development of services, basic infrastructure, or microcredit. A large number of those NGOs had previously benefited from support of Catholic religious communities. Many were also part, directly or indirectly, of the Filipino political left movements (Maoist, social-democrat, Marxist-Leninist, or socialist) that was particularly fragmented during the 1990s. Furthermore, a large number of these NGOs were related to different movements for which they either provided institutional support or played a role of facilitator or of leader. NGOs were officially recognized in the 1987 Constitution that was adopted after the Marcos (1972–1986) dictatorship ended. They became essential actors in the area of municipal governance and also, more recently, in the electoral processes. Indeed, many NGOs began to hold office in municipal councils or in local governance institutions, as seats were reserved for this sector of society. Another characteristic of Philippines' NGOs is their active involvement in multiple thematic and sectorial regional coalitions, particularly in the areas of agriculture and agrarian reform, fisheries, labor struggles, independent media, as well as on other issues such as debt and development. In fact, many of these networks—like the Southeast Asia Council in the areas of food security and fair trade (SEAC), or the South East Asian Committee for Advocacy (SEACA)—play a predominant coordination role for civil society organizations.

**Indonesia.** In contrast to the Philippines, NGOs and popular movements related to alter-globalization really emerged in Indonesia at the time of the financial crisis, with demands for political change and for the dissolution of Suharto's "New Order" (1966–1998). Today, there are several thousand NGOs in the country. Many of them have historical roots that go back to the protests against the abuses and arbitrary rule of Suharto's thirty-year dictatorship. It is important to remember that the massive and highly violent repression against militants of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965 and 1966—it is estimated that between 500,000 and one million partisans and sympathizers have been executed or have disappeared—paralyzed and slowed down the development of these organizations. We can therefore understand that activism outside the circles of the state has been limited to apolitical or non-sensitive issues, like the provision of basic health and education services to marginalized social groups, the founding of cooperatives, and the creation of technology and rural development centers. Other issues that were tackled during the

Suharto regime were respect for human rights and advocacy against arbitrary detentions. Finally, Muslim organizations like the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI), Nahdatul Ulama (NU)—an organization rooted in rural areas and active in religious schools—and Muhammadiyah—an organization active in urban areas that originates from wealthier circles—were tolerated under Suharto and also played a pioneering role in the founding of autonomous civil society organizations in Indonesia.

These organizations became a foundation for building new political parties after Suharto's departure in 1998 and the return of freer elections. The more recent period is characterized by the creation of organizations advocating for an alternative and independent press, as well as groups observing electoral processes, like the Information Centre and Action Network for Reform (PIJAR), the Indonesian Committee for the Observation of Elections, and the Alliance of Independent Journalists. Since the beginning of the millennium, an Indonesian alter-globalization movement has gradually been taking form. It is more discrete than elsewhere in the region, but still very important, and has been taking roots in working-class, indigenous, and peasant circles. It is interesting to point out that, today, the secretariat of the transnational peasant movement Via Campesina is in Jakarta.

**Malaysia.** Malaysia is a relatively prosperous state with a semi-democratic regime (Kuhonta 2011, 7–8). There are in Malaysia a little over a hundred NGOs, human's rights movements, and consumers' rights movements. The limited number of associative and independent groups is explained by the fact that the party in power, the United Malay's National Organization (UMNO), and its national alliance, the Barisan Nasional, are omnipresent and largely hegemonic, particularly in rural areas. The difficulties encountered by organizations are numerous: political control, police and judiciary constraints—in particular the Internal Security Act (ISA), which limits the expansion of independent citizen-initiated activities—as well as organizational divisions based on ethnicity (Malaysian, Chinese, or Tamil) (Loh 2004; Weiss 2004, 2008). The economic concessions and social programs implemented by the Malaysian government between the economic boom of 1980 and the 1997 crisis also decelerated the multiplication of radical or critical social movements by placating some demands. Therefore, many NGOs focus their work around issues important to the working class, such as consumption, environment, and women's rights. These demands constitute the heart of organizations like the

Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), the Malaysian Nature Society, the Voice of Malaysian, the National Human Rights Society (Hakam), and Aliran, an independent journalist association.

A political crisis accompanied the financial crisis of 1997 and, since then, social movements and NGOs have remained cautious, although they are slowly becoming more outspoken (Weiss 2006). The 2008 elections confirmed the gradual polarization and fragmentation taking place within the UMNO. As in Indonesia, orthodox and fundamentalist Muslim religious movements are becoming more present and visible. They have an organizational and ideological logic differing from that of the state, the political sphere, and the NGOs, and could be considered as being in competition with the regional alter-globalization movement (Sidel 2006; Abuza 2003).

## THEMES OF REGIONAL ACTIVISM

This brief overview of civil society organizations in three Southeast Asian countries underlines the fact that the history of activism appears largely determined both by the specific national socio-political and economic contexts, and regional dynamics such as regional integration and the economic boom experienced in Asia. Regional and foreign financing is important for national and local organizations, and sometimes constitutes a source of tension. At the very least, as will be discussed below, regional sources of funding seem to influence what should be the sectors of work of national and local organizations, which leads us to think that they act as agenda setters, sometimes trumping the importance of local issues. Today, many Asian activist regional organizations are organized around two main axes: the reinforcement of democracy and the implementation of fair development policies.

This convergence is translated into the creation of regional advocacy networks working on the issues of social and human rights like the Asian Cultural Forum on Human Rights and Development, the Asia-Pacific Research Network, the Third World Network, the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, the People's Coalition for Food Sovereignty, and the Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific. In parallel, many pacifist coalitions have formed in the region, like the Asian Peace Alliance and the Jakarta Consensus. This trend has been gaining speed since 9/11, with the implementation of anti-terrorist laws and the invasion of Iraq and

Afghanistan by the United States and its allies. The Asian Peace Alliance and the Jakarta Consensus were respectively formed in 2002 and 2003 by several Asian and international networks. They propose to define a pacific and inclusive alternative for the region.

Migrant workers have also established regional organizations and coalitions like the Migrant Asian Forum and the International Migrant Alliance, both of which include many different groups (Ford, Lyons, and Van Schendel 2012). This trend reflects the integration of the Asian economies into the world economy. Several of the participating groups are concerned with the precarious situation of migrant women, most notably the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development in Thailand, Tenaganita (Women's Force), and the Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility (CARAM-Asia).

Another issue around which regional activist groups mobilize is the rights of indigenous people, who constitute an important and heterogeneous social group. There are as many as 130 million indigenous people, considered as ethnic minorities by the states, taking into account only the border zones of the central massif of Southeast Asia (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and China) (Michaud 2006; Scott 2009). Like dalits in India, these social groups are usually the most marginalized in Southeast Asia and are still not very organized, in the sense of open and concerted collective actions. National organizations of different countries have also organized transnationally to exercise pressure on regional and international multilateral organizations. Tebtebba (Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education) is an example of successful transnational expression.

## **EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REGIME TYPES, SECTORS OF WORK, AND FORMS OF ACTIVISM**

### **REGIME TYPE AND SECTORS OF WORK**

Our first research intuition is that the regime type would influence organizations' sectors of work. We thought, for example, that work on governance, public administration, and democratization would be less frequent in semi-authoritarian regimes, since such work would tend to interfere with regime control.

To determine the influence of the regime type, we thus set out to compare the sectors in which organizations work in different countries. Organizations that were interviewed were asked about their sectors of work, which were divided in the following categories: urban development and rural settlement (1); environment (2); governance, public administration, and democratization (3); peace and security (4); trade, private sector development, and IT (5); education (6); agriculture (7); energy (8); health and population (9); and NGO and network development (10). We compiled the number of organizations working in each sector for different countries and their relative percentage.

The tables below first present the results for four Southeast Asian countries. The first table shows results for two electoral democracies, the Philippines and Indonesia. The second table shows results for two semi-authoritarian regimes, Malaysia and Cambodia.

<b>Sector of Work</b>	<b>Philippines</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>
Urban development and rural settlement	6%	1%
Environment	11%	10%
Governance, public administration, and democratization	38%	49%
Peace and security	16%	2%
Trade, private sector development, and IT	10%	14%
Education	3%	2%
Agriculture	7%	1%
Energy	0%	0%
Health and population	6%	21%
NGO and network development	3%	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1. Organizations' sectors of work, SEA democracies.

**Analysis.** What these tables show is that across the countries studied, the regime type does not seem to influence organizations' sectors of work when it comes to democracies and semi-democracies. Although our data seems to indicate that the regime type has little influence over organizations' sectors of work, it is important to mention that there are several weaknesses in our database that might weaken our

<b>Sector of work</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>Cambodia</b>
Urban development and rural settlement	3%	2%
Environment	9%	9%
Governance, public administration, and democratization	45%	37%
Peace and security	8%	5%
Trade, private sector development, and IT	9%	9%
Education	3%	0%
Agriculture	9%	2%
Energy	0%	0%
Health and population	14%	35%
NGO and network development	0%	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2. Organizations' sectors of work, SEA semi-democracies.

<b>Sector of work</b>	<b>Average democracies</b>	<b>Average Semi-democracies</b>
Urban development and rural settlement	3%	2%
Environment	9%	9%
Governance, public administration, and democratization	45%	37%
Peace and security	8%	5%
Trade, private sector development, and IT	9%	9%
Education	3%	0%
Agriculture	9%	2%
Energy	0%	0%
Health and population	14%	35%
NGO and network development	0%	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3. Comparison of averages for regime types.

conclusion. First, our data has been collected according to a snowball method. Our first aim was to be able to detect and draw networks of organizations in Asia, and Southeast Asia more specifically. Therefore, we used the snowball method for this task; we asked organizations (called organizations 1) to name organizations that they were working with, and subsequently asked these organizations about who they were working with too, etc. Data collected in this way is by no means independent, and thus inappropriate for statistical analysis. *This is the main reason why our conclusions should not be taken as definitive, and rather as a mean indicator for further research.* For example, when it comes to sectors of work, it seems logical that organizations will work with partners that work in similar sectors, and so this introduces a huge bias in our sectors of work by country data. Further, for some countries, we only have data about the partners of a few principal organizations (organizations 1). This means that even if we have 200 observations for such countries, these observations are all related to two to three organizations that named them, and, thus, this reinforces the bias in our sample.

Despite these limitations, what we can observe is that the regime type does not seem to influence organizations' sectors of work. This is somewhat surprising, since one of the sectors for which we collected data is governance, public administration, and democratization, which should definitely be more difficult in semi-democratic regimes. It might well be that problems in our database have led to such results, but if this is not the case, what could explain that the regime type does not influence organizations' sectors of work? For now, we will suggest two alternative explanations. One is that regional organizations (especially funding organizations) might act the agenda setters. We explore this idea in the next section. Another possible explanation might be that NGOs and civil society organizations reflect the spreading and adoption of norms and ideas linked to a global civic culture, which helps account for this relative homogeneity despite differences in national contexts. We will return to this idea in the concluding section.

## AGENDA SETTING BY REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

How can we possibly explain that the regime type, in Southeast Asia at least, does not seem to influence organizations' sectors of work?



<b>Sector of Work</b>	<b>Organizations linked to AFRIM</b>	<b>Organizations linked to the Asia Foundation</b>
Urban development and rural settlement	6%	1%
Environment	11%	10%
Governance, public administration, and democratization	38%	49%
Peace and security	16%	2%
Trade, private sector development, and IT	10%	14%
Education	3%	2%
Agriculture	7%	1%
Energy	0%	0%
Health and population	6%	21%
NGO and network development	3%	0%

The hypothesis we put forth and test here is that agenda setting by regional and international organizations might be more important than the regime type when it comes to organizations' sectors of work. Agenda setting by such organizations would explain why countries tend to have organizations working in the same sectors in the same proportion. If only local/national dynamics mattered, then proportions should vary across countries, since different countries face different issues. The fact that proportions tend to be similar might reinforce our hypothesis that regional/international organizations act as agenda setters. They lead organizations across countries and regime types to work on similar issues, in similar proportions, and somewhat trump the influence of the regime type and local issues.

To try and show this, we will use the example of the Philippines, since this is the country for which our data is the most exhaustive and reliable. We have considered four organizations active in the country and their influence on the sectors of work of affiliated organizations, to try and see if they influence the sectors in which they work. We compared the sectors of work of the affiliated organizations with the

<b>Organizations linked to the FDC</b>	<b>Organizations linked to ADB NGO</b>	<b>Country average (Philippines)</b>
14%	6%	1%
15%	11%	10%
29%	38%	49%
2%	16%	2%
16%	10%	14%
6%	3%	2%
10%	7%	1%
0%	0%	0%
4%	6%	21%
4%	3%	0%

Table 4. Sectors of work of affiliated organizations, Philippines.

national average for the country to see if regional organizations tend to pull them away from the national average, in which case we might think they definitively have an influence on these organizations' sectors of work. If conclusive, this test would support the argument that there is indeed agenda setting at work, although it does not prove it beyond doubt.

To test this idea, we examined four organizations present in the Philippines: Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao (AFRIM), a Mindanao-based NGO working on socioeconomic and rights issues; the Asia Foundation (a regional funding organization); the Freedom from Debt Coalition (FDC), a Philippine-based advocacy coalition; and the NGO Forum on the ADB (Asia Development Bank), a regional coalition of civil society organizations that debate with the ADB and challenge ADB policies. AFRIM and the FDC can be considered nationally focused organizations. Thus, if they influence the sectors of work of affiliated organizations operating on the national level, one would expect variations across cases and differences with national averages. The Asia Foundation and the NGO Forum on the

ADB can be considered as a regional organization (or a national chapter of regional organization). Therefore, if they influence the sectors of work of Filipino NGOs, it would show that regional organizations do influence the sectors of work across countries, and thus might explain the lack of influence of the regime type.

What we see here is that when it comes to organizations both on the national (AFRIM, FDC) and on the regional (Asia Foundation, NGO Forum) levels, they have a significant influence on the sectors of work of affiliated organizations. The organizations affiliated with any of them work, on average, in sectors of work that significantly differ from the Filipino national average for sectors of work. Therefore, it is very likely that there is indeed agenda setting happening in the world of organizations, and that this agenda setting partly explains the lack of influence of the regime type over organizations' sectors of work. Further, it might also explain why sectors of work and their relative proportion tend to be similar across countries.

For example, if one looks at the connection between FDC and Focus on the Global South, one can argue that FDC acts as a key nexus of information and advocacies acting as a relay between Focus's regional advocacy and FDC's work in the Philippines. Figure 1 offers a visual illustration of this networking process.

**Limits.** We have used the term affiliated organizations to characterize organizations that were designated by principal organizations (organizations 1) as having a relationship to them. Nonetheless, we have to take into account the relationship between these organizations as an important variable: Do the organizations named by the first one act as partners or as members, and do they indeed receive funding from the organization that named them?

In the case of partners, it might well be that the influence on sectors of work noticed above is not one of causality, but is rather due to the fact that organizations that work on similar sectors tend to work together. This is the case for AFRIM and the NGO Forum. But the Asia Foundation sponsors its affiliated organizations, and the organizations affiliated with the FDC are designated as members, not as partners. Therefore, in these cases, it is more likely that the main organizations do influence the sectors of work of affiliated ones, and act as agenda setters. And with the Asia Foundation, a regional funding organization, we still have one clear case of a regional organization acting as an agenda setter for affiliated, sponsored organizations in a national context.

Alliance of Progressive Labor • Anban ng Manggagawa sa Argrikultura  
 Buhay Kalayaan Sining  
 Center for Agrarian Reform, Empowerment and Transformation  
 Center for Labor Advocacy, Solidarity and Services, Inc.  
 Center for Popular Migrant Advocacy  
 Confederation of Independent Unions in the Public Sector  
 Friends of the Earth-Philippines • Initiatives for International Dialogue  
 Institute for Popular Democracy • Integrated Rural Development Foundation  
 Kanlungan Center Foundation Inc. • KASAMA-PILIPINAS  
 Kongreso ng Pagkakaisa ng Maraitang Lungsod  
 Labor Education and Research Network  
 Lean L. Alejandro Foundation • Liga-Pilipina  
 Makabayang Alyansa ng mga Magsasaka sa Timog-Katagalugan  
 MATINIKK • Medical Action Group  
 National Economic Protectionism Association  
 Pambansang Katipunan ng mga Samahan sa Kanayunan  
 Philippine Peace and Solidarity Council  
 Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement  
 Pinag-isang Lakas at Galaw ng Sambayanan  
 Pinag-isang Lakas ng Sambayanan  
 Public Sector Labor Independent Confederation  
 Resource Center for People's Development  
 SANLAKAS Youth • Sarilaya • Task Force Detainees of the Philippines  
 Volunteers for Urban Renewal • WomanHealth Philippines  
 Women Worker Resource Center • Zone One Tondo Organization

### **Freedom from Debt Coalition**

### **Focus on the Global South**

Citizens Initiative for Peace • Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace  
 Committee for an Independent Foreign Policy • Forum Against FTAs  
 GM Free India Campaign • India Climate Justice Group  
 Indian People's Campaign Against the WTO • Mumbai Paani  
 Mumbai Peoples Action Committee  
 Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy  
 Peace Mumbai • Peoples Forum Against ADB • Peoples SAARC  
 World Social Forum India Working Committee

Figure 1. Connections (national and transnational) between Focus on the Global South and Freedom from Debt Coalition. From the database of civil society organizations in Southeast Asia developed by Caouette et al.

Further, we must also note that we have only looked at the presence of agenda setting for four organizations. Our results thus do not prove a relation, but rather show that a mechanism of agenda setting can sometimes be at work, even though we cannot right now generalize this to the whole country or region. Further tests, with a database in which observations would be independent, would be required for this.

## REGIME TYPE AND TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS

We also thought that the regime type might influence the type of organizations present in the country. More specifically, we thought that in semi-authoritarian regimes, networks and coalitions would be more common, while in democratic regimes, NGOs would be more common. This is because networks and coalitions might be harder to target for regimes, thus making them an instrument of choice under semi-authoritarianism.

We have considered the type of organizations in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This selection is mostly due to the lack of data for other Southeast Asian countries according to this criterion in our database. The results are as follows:

	Philippines	Indonesia	Malaysia
Networks and coalitions	37%	24%	40%
NGOs	39%	58%	46%

Table 5. Organization types by country, Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

This seems to show that regime type does not influence organization types either. We still have to be careful about many possible caveats, such as the fact that the snowball method might bias the types of organizations present in our database, and the fact that some countries have a limited number of main organizations, or of main organizations with data about types of organizations, also introduces further bias in our database. However, it is possible to argue that the issue of languages and easily access to international funding might be an issue. As Clifford Bob (2005) noted in his study of mobilizing and marketing social protest, the capacity and ease to use media and global forum make it easier to establish network and coalitions. A similar agreement is made by Tarrow and Della Porta (2005, 234) when discussing the transnationalizing of protest, where

they argue that “rooted cosmopolitans,” defined as “people and groups who are rooted in specific national contexts, but who engage in regular activities that require their involvement in transnational networks of contacts and conflict,” are playing a key role in allowing this global connections and the scaling up of forms of protest.<sup>6</sup>

What our research indicates at this stage is that setting up network and coalitions are contingent on access to the global arenas and forum, which are usually conducted in English, which is more readily used in the Philippines and in Malaysia. Another reason might also be that NGO and networks are more recent in Indonesia, as the Suharto regime was more repressive than in Malaysia. Although the country is experiencing currently an era of political liberalization, the regime change remains recent. While Malaysia is still a semi-democratic regime, it has been as such for a long time, which may explain that both NGO and networks have been established there. Also, it is important to note that more militant organizations such as social movements, religious organizations and unions are not as important, at least in our data base.

## CONCLUSION

Today, much still remains to be done before we can fully understand Asian activism in a precise and differentiated way. As this text demonstrates, it is virtually impossible to do a precise synthesis of the different faces of activism in East, South, and Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, it is still possible to outline a few reflections. After conducting some preliminary empirical research, we found that evidence for the first hypotheses shows no clear relationship between the regime type and the sectors in which national NGOs work. What comes out is that there are now a set of common themes and areas of work that are largely shared and adopted by organizations that do not appear to be directly linked to the specific nature of the political regime in place. Such findings would be in line with the ideas developed by Meyer (2010) and Boli and Thomas (1999) regarding the institutional homology and the global emergence of a shared world culture (Meyer, Boli, et al. 1997; Boli 2001).

Within such a perspective, culture plays a central role. As noted by Boli and Thomas (1999, 17), “Culture lies at the heart of world development. Technical progress, bureaucratization, capitalist

organization, states and markets are embedded in cultural models, often not explicitly recognized as such, that specify the 'nature of things' and the 'purposes of action.'" As they further explained (*ibid.*, 18): "The enactment of cultural models thus represents broad homologies, with actors everywhere defining themselves in similar ways and pursuing similar purposes by similar means, but specific actions in specific contexts vary almost without limit."

In our analysis of Southeast Asian civil society organizations, such homologies appear, despite important variations in national contexts. However, the importance of diffusion and funding mechanisms is also relevant where most densely NGO-populated countries of the region play a central role in stimulating and sustaining emerging civil society activism in other states (Caouette 2010a).

In addition, the development model that emphasizes export-oriented growth and economic liberalization, put into question since the 1997 crisis, has contributed to local, national, and regional organizations adopting a common speech and common practices critical of neo-liberalism, which could also contribute to explain why organizations' sectors of work by country do not vary that much in the region. In parallel, activists working for social justice in the region have developed different regional platforms for collective action and advocacy. This was a result of the accelerating integration of the region's economies to the world economy, as well as of the accelerating transnational fluxes and processes like agribusiness, labor migration, ecological contamination, extractive industry, militarization, and the concentration of economic activities in the hands of important consortiums.

Our results seem to show that civil society organizations are shaped by a combination of local and global dynamics. We have seen that national organizations tend to be influenced by agenda setting on the part of regional organizations, to the point where it might trump the importance of national/local issues, such as the regime type, and might homogenize the issues on which organizations work across countries. At the same time, national/local animosities also influence regional organizations, whether they want it or not. Therefore, we can affirm that regional and national organizations shape each other, and that the influence is far from going in one single direction.

Today, the number and diversity of the issues put forward make the region rich and complex. Centripetal forces try to make coordination and aggregation of Asian activist demands and expressions possible,



but important centrifugal forces are equally important. For example, there were three parallel events during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in the Philippines in 1996. A large part of the contemporary civil society activism did not appear in a context of “tabula rasa” or Day 0. On the contrary, many are the fruits of the efforts of activists and partisans that originate from distinct political and ideological lines. The concepts of horizontality, of plurality and of deliberative democracy are difficult to implement in contexts of the political traditions of democratic centralism. Furthermore, many have underscored the major role exercised by NGOs and better financed organizations, capable of communicating in English and of using the web. Much empirical research remains to be carried out to identify more precisely how regional and transnational activism interact and structure local activism. In fact, some recent researches have emphasized how local dynamics are much more complex than oftentimes depicted by analysts or funding agencies. (See for example Li’s [2007] recent contribution on Indonesia or Dressler’s work [2013] on Palawan in the Philippines). The nexus between funding, global norms and ideas, transnational connections, and the local and national contexts is clearly a dynamic space that requires further careful and detailed analysis. The constitution of a comprehensive data-base on civil society organizations might help identify axes of explanation and recurring patterns that can account for a high degree of similarity in areas and themes of advocacy and in the institutional forms adopted by NGOs and networks in the region.

## NOTES

- 1 The article builds on a previous chapter co-authored with Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem, entitled “The Anti-Globalization Movement in the Philippines,” published in *Social Activism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Michel Ford (London: Routledge, 2013), 119–37. The authors would like to thank Hoai-An Tran for her superb research assistance and coordination, as well as Sandra Vilder and Marika Tassoni-Rivest in developing a database of civil society organizations in Southeast Asia.
- 2 We choose here to use the neologism “alterglobalization” because it conveys more precisely the ideas underpinning much of the resistance to the mainstream economic globalization, namely its neoliberal incarnation. This expression also comes closer to the French “altermondialisme,” meaning “another globalization” or an alternative to the dominant economic model. It also nicely echoes the motto of the World Social Forum that “Another world is possible” (Sen, Anand, Escobar, and Waterman 2004). For a longer discussion on the origins and meanings of “altermondialisme,” see Dupuis-Deri 2009; see also Caouette 2010b.
- 3 For example, a 2002 review report produced by external consultants, examining the impact and role of a regional organization, Focus on the Global South, explained that four attributes helped understand why it acted as a key transnational activist network with a capacity to influence national and locally-based civil society organization: “political radicalism, a clear political position based on power relations; intellectual leadership, clear and credible analyses; convening power, the ability to bring people

and organizations together; financial resources, the ability to raise funds and finance the relationship” (Banpasirichote, Singh, and Van der Borgh 2002, 2).

- 4 At the moment, more than 4,600 civil society organizations (NGO, social movements, think tanks, and funding organizations) have been identified and encoded. Although apparently large, our database has some important limitations. First, our data has been collected with a snowball method, since our first objective was to be able to detect and draw networks of organizations in Asia and, more specifically, in Southeast Asia. Therefore, we used the snowball method for this task: we first asked organizations (called organizations 1) to name the organizations they were working with, then we subsequently examined these organizations and looked at the organizations with which they were working too, etc. Data collected in this way is by no means independent, and is thus inappropriate for statistical analysis as is. This is the main reason why our conclusions should not be taken to be definitive. At the moment the analysis and the completion of the database is still on-going and is being cross-checked using the data available in the International Yearbook of International Organizations.
- 5 Totals do not add up to 100% because other types of organizations in the countries were not considered, such as religious organizations or social movements.
- 6 Two other remarks can be made regarding this new stratum of activists. One is that they have “multiple belongings,” meaning that activists have “overlapping memberships linked with loosely structured, polycentric networks.” Second, these activists share “flexible identities” meaning “identities characterized by inclusiveness and a positive emphasis on diversity and cross-fertilization, with limited identifications that develop especially around common campaigns on objects perceived as ‘concrete’ and nurtured by search for dialogue” (Tarrow and Della Porta 2005, 237; italics in the original).

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