

# THE DECLINE OF THE LEFT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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A famous, but now defunct, Australian pop group of the 1970s once asked, 'Whatever happened to the revolution?' If the late 1960s and early 1970s seemed like an opportunity lost in the West, then it is doubly so for much of Southeast Asia. For many, the prospects for socialism in Southeast Asia had often looked promising. In fact, in Southeast Asia, communist and socialist movements enjoyed their greatest influence during the anti-colonial and nationalist struggles following World War II. The organisational strengths of these movements, embodying coalitions of workers, peasants and nationalists, made them indispensable to political strategies for self-government. Indeed, as will be indicated below, the Left played a pivotal role in the development of civil society in these years.<sup>1</sup> Socialists and communists also earned the respect of the masses for the often courageous roles played in confronting colonial forces in this process. Even so, the achievements of the Southeast Asian Left should be kept in perspective, noting that its ideological appeal was confined to strategic sites rather than being embraced by the masses.

Today, few commentators would suggest that the Left, especially in its revolutionary form, has much future at all in Southeast Asia. With the exception of the Philippines, few genuine armed struggles remain. Outside the Philippines, self-proclaimed leftist political movements barely exist and where Communist parties remain in power, in Vietnam and Laos, capitalist production dominates while authoritarian political structures are kept in place. And capitalist economic development continues at a hectic pace throughout Southeast Asia. For the Left, the situation appears more bleak than at any time this century.

At least this is the general impression. But it just might be that this view masks a wide and important struggle in contemporary Southeast Asia in which the Left may yet be an important participant. We refer to the struggle for the extension of civil society. Certainly, as we will indicate

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\*The authors thank John Girling, Andrew Brown and Jane Hutchison for their comments and criticisms. We are also grateful for research assistance provided by Damen Keever.

below, the Left's role is being overshadowed by a range of other contending political forces. Nevertheless, opportunities do exist for the Left, providing it can link with other progressive groups now challenging the state's political domain.

In this essay we intend to examine the decline of socialism and communism (for convenience, we will sometimes refer to 'the Left') in Southeast Asia and, for the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on the modern countries of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, and their previous incarnations as colonies, with Thailand (previously, **Siam**) being the non-colonial exception.

In brief, our argument is that socialism and communism (as closely related political movements) have, in recent times, lost much of their political and economic attractiveness. However, we will show that the Left has been significant, giving much momentum to the development of non-state political space (what we will term civil society) in these countries. We suggest that this was particularly the case in three periods: **1920s–1930s**, **1940s–1950s**, and the **1970s**, when the Left played a pivotal role in expanding the arena of political activity. The defeat of non-state movements saw civil society greatly reduced or even expunged by authoritarian governments, which especially targeted socialists, communists and labour and peasant organisations.

We will go on to suggest that in the contemporary period, the political space associated with civil society is again being created in the societies of Southeast Asia. However, for reasons to be set out below, it is no longer socialists and communists who are leading this movement. Rather, a range of other non-state groups (independent unions, non-governmental **organisations**, religious groups, women's groups, business and professional organisations, and the like) are playing the leading roles in establishing **civil society**.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, we contend that the contemporary situation is not all gloom for those on the Left. Indeed, for a number of reasons to be explained below, the political space created for non-state organisation is available to a range of groups, and the Left can utilise this space to develop new strategies of opposition to authoritarian regimes, non-representative government, the tyranny of the market, and capitalist exploitation and repression.

In taking these positions, we are challenging the increasingly common view that the development of civil society in Southeast Asia is recent. This position discounts the political struggles of earlier decades. We will contend that the earlier development of non-state political space was closed through the action of repressive governments, both colonial and post-colonial. In other words, we believe that the current deepening of civil society in many parts of Southeast Asia is not a new phenomenon and does not represent an evolutionary transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

## Approaches to Civil Society

The political movements of the Left have made an important, usually unacknowledged, contribution to the deepening and expansion of civil society in all of the countries of Southeast Asia. This contribution has not been acknowledged in the emerging literature on democratisation and regime change. Indeed, these works adopt definitions of political or regime change and democracy which direct attention only to the most recent round of jockeying between the state and civil society.

One of the reasons for this emphasis on recent events is the search for a relationship between economic development and political change. Political theorists from the modernisation school have staged a comeback on the strength of recent economic growth in parts of the developing world, prophesying the inevitable breakdown of authoritarian rule as growth and modernisation inexorably expand civil society and come into contradiction with the centralised political structures of authoritarianism. From this perspective, social pluralism is all too neatly translated into political pluralism, hence democracy. The emergence of a middle class and a technically-educated population is especially important in this analysis, creating new centres of power and greater exposure and receptiveness to liberal democratic ideals.' This interest in establishing a **link** between economic growth and political structure may appear odd, -as economic determinism was used by these theorists as a damning charge against Marxists.

Indeed, in Marxist theory, the equation of capitalist development with a more advanced civil society is also present, especially in Gramsci's understanding of the way in which bourgeois 'consensus', or ideological hegemony, is either maintained or challenged. In his attempt to work within this tradition, **Girling** refers to economic growth leading to a corresponding expansion in 'intermediate' forces of civil society (professionals, intellectuals and organisers) who form a new layer of society and effectively 'prise society apart from the direct weight of a powerful elite and a powerless peasantry'. But consider the following proposition by Girling:

. . . economic development gives rise to 'civil society' i.e. *new intermediate groups ranging from middle class professionals to labour organisers and party officials - which in turn creates pressure for the development of representative institutions enabling the 'new social forces' to take part in decisions affecting them.*

To reinforce this, he adds that civil society and democracy require significant economic development, where the state is powerful, and where officials and the private sector can **co-operate**.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a strong capitalism seems to be theorised as a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of civil society and democracy, even if the direction of political change is viewed in much more problematic terms than is the case for liberal theorists.

Marxists have also noted the structural contradictions between advancing capitalist industrialisation, the attendant class structures, and authoritarian rule. Here accountability, mediation and conciliation are seen as functional requirements of a sophisticated market economy. Unresolved competition between emerging social forces – including different fractions of capital – also threatens political stability and thus the climate for capital **investment**.<sup>6</sup> Such circumstances also facilitate a measure of tolerance of, and even dependence on, a more expansive civil society.

The presumed link between capitalist economic development and the emergence of civil society is taken further when the focus falls on democracy. There is often a normative assumption in both liberal and Marxist-influenced theory that equates democracy and parliaments, voting and consent.<sup>7</sup> This is taken furthest by pluralist writers in the identification of political opposition with political parties and constitutionality; that is the existence of loyal oppositions as the only legitimate political **opposition**.<sup>8</sup> This position means that the parliamentary form in capitalist society is idealised as the most appropriate model of democracy, especially as it is seen to divert political conflict into an arena where physical coercion or violence is replaced by discussion, argument and the rule of law.

A problem with these perspectives is that they tend to ignore the struggles involved in the emergence of civil society. Many of these struggles have taken place outside the confines of parliaments, constitutions, and legal political parties. In the case of Southeast Asia, for example, **Girling** identifies instances of democratic regression without any serious acknowledgment of the preceding gains. By implication, they are an **aberration**.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, van der Kroef **utilises** a far wider definition when discussing political opposition in Southeast Asia, noting that there were at least three categories: constitutional-reformist; **ideological-totalitarian**; and **secessionist**.<sup>10</sup> While one might quibble about the terminology, his categorisation is important for recognising that political opposition is not limited to the formal institutions of government.

Such views also tend to **confirm** the perspective that economic development leads to the inevitable expansion of civil society and, hence, a pluralist political system. But, as we will note below, the emergence of civil society is not an historical end-point, but may be seen as a product of the ebbing and flowing of opposition. Indeed, while the emergence of civil society is **significant** to the development of democracy, the space of civil society can expand and has expanded even under unrepresentative regimes. As will be indicated below, this has certainly been the case in Southeast Asia. It is appropriate, then, to define briefly what we mean when we refer to civil society.

Civil society refers to an autonomous sphere '... from which political forces representing constellations of interests in society have contested state power'.<sup>11</sup> The range of organisations in society may be enormous, but

not all engage in overtly political activity. For example, seemingly apolitical groups can include sporting clubs as well as charitable and **welfare-oriented** associations – these might be considered as civic organisations." Politically active groups include political parties, trade unions, employer and professional associations, women's groups, student organisations, peasant and ethnic associations, an increasingly expansive group of politically activist non-government organisations (NGOs), and a range of social movements. These groups are regularly involved in political actions which attempt to advance the interests of people, ranging from their members to a more general interest of wider groups in society.

However, and contrary to the influential liberal view, civil society is not the natural opposite to the oppressive state, nor separate from capitalist relations of exploitation and **domination**.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the existence of activist organisations does not guarantee parliamentary democracy. Rather, as has been shown for Eastern Europe, and will be demonstrated for Southeast Asia in this essay, civil society can in fact co-exist with an authoritarian **regime**.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that the existence of such organisations can widen political contestation beyond the narrow base in parties and parliaments. This possibility is contingent upon class power. As Rueschemeyer and his colleagues observe, where 'powerful and cohesive upper classes' dominate the organisations of civil society, they may 'serve as conduits of authoritarian ideologies, thus weakening democracy'. Employer organisations, for example, may agitate for the right to represent independently their members' interests in policy deliberation but, at the same time, encourage the suppression or prohibition of worker and consumer organisations. Nevertheless, the autonomy of such **organisations** is fundamental, even if the class interests of a particular organisation may vary widely and, in some cases, may serve to consolidate the hegemony of dominant classes. Only through autonomous organisations can the numerical strength of subordinate classes be realised; only through them can they be protected from the hegemony of dominant **classes**.<sup>15</sup>

However, this need for autonomy involves the state. Bernhard points out that, for an organisation to qualify as part of civil society, its autonomy must eventually be legally sanctioned by the state. Through struggle, the state will be compelled to recognise a political space where autonomous self-organisation can occur outside the sphere of official **politics**.<sup>16</sup> This autonomy is used to place civil society in a position to have an **institutionalised** influence over the official political sphere. In other words, the state must itself establish boundaries to define that autonomous space and protect it from its own interference. In essence, then, the state must define what is to be considered 'political' **and** 'legitimate'.

In return for the granting of political space, the organisations and associations occupying it are expected to engage in self-discipline in return for the protection afforded them. Thus, it is not the emergence of

organisations that is the measure of an expanded civil society. Rather, state actors must effectively legitimate the rights of such bodies to engage in political activity and even to challenge the exercise of state power before civil society can be said to be established. Thus, civic organisations may exist in the most authoritarian polities, but they do not then have the right to be politically activist. It can thus be seen that social pluralism does not always translate into political pluralism, as many liberal theorists would have it.

For the purposes of this essay, we can now summarise our picture of civil society. We begin by differentiating our position from those who see economic development as necessarily leading to the emergence of civil society. Social pluralism, we suggest, does not necessarily translate into political pluralism and democracy. Certainly, capitalism does not require political pluralism or democratic forms. Thus, the extension of the political space which constitutes civil society is not seen as an end-point to political development. Rather, we argue that the space of civil society ebbs and flows, and can exist under a range of political regimes. More important for us is the activity of political oppositions. While we see oppositions as central to the emergence of democratic politics, we also see this as being shaped by class forces and through extended political and social struggle. In addition, opposition is not something which only takes place within parliament and political parties, and we argue for a wider perspective on opposition and civil society. Finally, we make the point that the extent of the political space of civil society and the definition of 'legitimate' or 'acceptable' political activity depends, in large measure, on state acceptance.

#### A Brief History of Civil Society in Southeast Asia<sup>17</sup>

Writing in 1947, Du Bois noted three 'European streams of thought' which she considered had had a marked impact on Southeast Asian societies. These were social humanism, nationalism, and Marxism. Social humanism was seen to involve education and trade unionism, and provided legal protection as well as introducing the ideal of the dignity of the individual. Nationalism was seen as being crucial as a powerful force against colonialism." Marxism was clearly linked to the rise of nationalism and anti-colonialism, and appealed to internationally-linked labour. It should be remembered that Lenin's contribution to the debate on imperialism was a powerful document for those opposing colonialism. Lenin had seen the potential for revolution in Asia, writing in 1913, for example, that in the Dutch East Indies there 'was no stopping the growth of the democratic movement'.<sup>19</sup> Du Bois explains the attractiveness of Marxism: '. . . its apparent reconciliation of social humanism and nationalism in colonial

areas; . . . its appeal to . . . intellectuals and seamen; and . . . the practical efforts of Russia, which in the 1920s was still a revolutionary nation."<sup>12</sup>

As will be indicated below, there is considerable insight in these observations. While historians have noted the impact of nationalism, little has been made of the contribution of Marxism, and the manner in which the Left took a leading role in linking anti-colonialism, nationalism and 'social humanism'. Du Bois was writing in one of the periods where civil society was expanding, and the Left was playing a central political role. This period was, however, just one of a number of such periods.

It is obviously not possible to provide a full account of the trials and tribulations of the relationships between civil society and the state in all of the countries of Southeast Asia over a period of some 70 years. Rather, we will take three broad slices through the modern history of Southeast Asia, when civil society did develop, indicate the crucial roles played by the Left, and show how governments were able to limit and close this space. We begin with the 1920s and 1930s, not a period usually considered to be a hotbed of Leftist activity in Southeast Asia.

### *The 1920s and 1930s*

In the century up to the 1920s, the colonial governments (including the modernising Thai state) of Southeast Asia had seen and defeated numerous uprisings, most of them in the countryside. These millenarian reactions to colonial rule were, in part, a response to economic and political change. By this time, the various governments had instituted centralised and bureaucratised administrations, had marked out the geographic boundaries of colonies and nation-states, and had, by and large, established government-defined systems of law and order." In addition, in this era of high colonialism in Southeast Asia, local economies had been reoriented to the demands of mercantilism, with trade in commodities dominating the economic relationship with the West. The focus of political activity perceptibly shifted to urban areas and civil society-state relations.

It is sometimes forgotten that the 1920s marked the beginning of a period of renaissance in Southeast Asia, and a significant change in the ideological climate and considerable political and social ferment. This ferment represented, in part, a struggle for the expansion of the political space we call civil society. The governments of the period were unrepresentative, either as an absolute monarchy as in Thailand, or as colonial administrations. The ferment was a struggle to gain greater political representation and national independence."

It is noteworthy that, prior to the 1920s, non-state community (or civic) organisations were significant. Throughout Southeast Asia a large number of civic associations had emerged, especially in urban areas, to further the interests of local people and the large immigrant communities of particularly the Chinese, but also other immigrants like the Indians. These

groups were not generally politically active, and were certainly not sanctioned to engage in oppositional politics, and their activities were usually social, cultural and apolitical. However, they were often utilised by the state in managing their community, acting as political compradors between the state and their constituents, who were usually non-citizens. However, there were times when these organisations became politicised and found themselves acting in opposition to the state. This often led to labour activism, which immediately pitted these organisations against the state. Where labour was involved, the state would quickly brand their activities as subversive, and the organisation risked being labelled as a 'secret society', which meant illegality.

In Singapore, while the British maintained social order through direct repression, their general neglect of the population's welfare had the effect of encouraging voluntary and independent organisations to fill the vacuum. Privately-funded vernacular-medium schools, usually operating as night schools, were amongst the most numerous and significant of such organisations in Singapore, prompting the colonial state to require registration of schools and teachers and giving the government the power to regulate school activities. Apart from education, the associations provided welfare, legal and minor infrastructural services.<sup>23</sup>

But some politically significant groups also emerged. These included debating clubs, literary and study groups, and the like, which were often the training ground for nationalists. Educated locals in such groups soon found themselves confronting many of the assumptions of colonial rule while organised as 'native' associations.<sup>24</sup>

Much of this growth of civic organisations took place in the period between 1890 and 1920; and by this latter date, many of them were moving beyond welfare and becoming politicised. For example, in British Burma, the Young Men's Buddhist Association became the General Council of Burmese Associations in 1920, and began agitation against the colonial government, including strikes and boycotts. In the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), a plethora of associations had become politicised, especially student groups and religious, notably Muslim, organisations. Many of these religious groups in Indonesia and British Malaya were influenced by the anti-colonial sentiment of Islamic reform movements in Egypt.<sup>25</sup>

Chinese societies and guilds were in many cases transformed into separate employer and employee organisations as capitalism developed, and ethnic workers' organisations were often showing solidarity.<sup>26</sup> The response from administrators was, as Trocki notes, the creation of '... security forces, secret police organizations and spy networks to suppress political movements and labour unions.'<sup>27</sup> While unions were small and represented only a fraction of the population – most of the population were farmers – they were economically significant groups operating in strategic areas such as the ports, transport and other activities central to trade."

Unions were clearly non-state centres of political activism, especially when linked to socialist, communist and oppositional movements as they were prone to do, seriously challenging state power.

The 1920s and 1930s saw significant labour organisation. For example, in Thailand, the earliest recorded labour activity dates from the 1880s, and by the 1920s labour activism led to the establishment of a workers' newspaper during a particularly vicious strike in 1923. The group behind the strike and the newspaper was to become a driving force organising both the industrial and wider political struggles of industrial workers against the absolute monarchy. This activism caused the state to confront the so-called 'labour problem.'"

Whilst the colonial and Thai states seemed prepared to tolerate, indeed, in some respects were relieved, that there were a range of non-government associations promoting the collective interests of different social and ethnic groups, they appear to have felt most threatened when the developing Left joined these organisations. For example, private, Chinese-language schools throughout the region were caught up in the political movements in China, especially after the 1911 Revolution, and became important recruiting grounds for leftist youth and student movements. A strong anti-imperialist and anti-colonial rhetoric began to emerge from these schools, and communists were seen to control many of them. The Communist Youth League in Singapore was established in 1926, with a strong base in such schools. A similar pattern was seen in Thailand and Malaya, and the authorities closed Chinese schools and attempted to control **curricula**.<sup>21</sup> But it was not just the Chinese groups which became a focus of left-wing activism. Indeed, from the early 1920s, socialist and communist **organisations** had formed in Southeast Asia. For example, the Communist Party of Indonesia (later, Partai **Kommunis** Indonesia, or PKI) was formed in 1920. Following this, and in **concert** with developments in Vietnam and China, communist organisations were founded throughout the region, and many of the nascent trades unions came under Left **influence**.<sup>21</sup>

Some of this early activity was clearly related to the establishment of the Third International (Comintern) in 1919 and developing Soviet foreign policy. The Comintern had seen significant debate, especially between M.N. Roy and Lenin, over the relationship between communist parties and anti-colonialism, with the latter favouring alliances with nationalist movements, while the former wanted an emphasis on developing the communist movement. While a later meeting agreed to a compromise, it was clear that local conditions also played a significant part in the strategy adopted. For example, in the Dutch East **Indies** the 1920s saw the strengthening of anti-colonialism and a nationalist movement, within which the PKI became a leading element, developing a revolutionary strategy which placed emphasis on the anti-colonial struggle. The **PKI** suffered a serious setback in 1926–27 following an abortive uprising, but its

influence was soon to be restored. In Thailand, where anti-colonialism was not an issue, the nascent Left was able to develop, from its origins in the Chinese community, as the absolutism of the monarchy was questioned.<sup>28</sup>

A major boost to the Left came with the Great Depression, when economic and social conditions deteriorated, paving the way for more concerted action. In Singapore, the Comintern-inspired South Seas General Labour Union (GLU), which was established in 1926, had been unable to make any headway. By 1930, however, organised labour and the Left advanced. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was established in 1930, with Singapore as its base. The economic downturn in the rubber plantations and tin mines gave considerable impetus to the MCP and its associated unions. A concerted campaign to mobilise labour, which included the formation of the Malayan General Labour Union in 1934, saw the unions become a strong base for left activism."

In the Philippines, the Depression saw the expansion of the opposition and independence movement and, in 1929, the founding of the Socialist Party, which had its own labour organisation. Supporting peasants, tenant farmers and workers and taking a nationalist stand, the Party ran in elections as the Popular Front, and increased its support between 1933 and 1937. The Communist Party (*Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas* or PKP) was officially established in 1930, but banned a year later, and went underground. The Socialists merged with the Communist Party in 1938 to establish an anti-fascist front."

It is usually said that the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) did not establish itself until 1942, but reports from the 1930s indicate that a variety of communist organisations existed, particularly within the Chinese and Vietnamese communities, but also including ethnic Thais. More importantly, however, following the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, one faction of the People's Party was accused of 'Bolshevist' tendencies, especially in its relations with labour and students and in its economic policies. The government banned communism in 1933.<sup>29</sup>

By the late 1930s, communist and socialist movements had emerged throughout Southeast Asia, both linked and divided by ethnicity and all influenced by the nationalist, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements. Even where the anti-colonial struggle was emphasised, this did not diminish an element of internationalism on the Left, evidenced by the activities of revolutionaries like Tan Malaka and Ho Chi Minh who travelled the region. An element that linked these groups was a shared distrust of Western liberalism and capitalism. Certainly, the colonial experience had discredited capitalism for many locals.<sup>30</sup>

It is apparent that the Left in Southeast Asia had been able to capitalise on these suspicions, and utilise the political space which developed in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the Left was a driving force for the extension of this space. However, as World War II approached, there was a move to

curtail some of the resultant political activity, which was seen by governments as a measure of rebellion. In Thailand, the military had established its control over government and moved closer to fascist regimes in Europe and Japan. In Singapore and Malaya, the colonial state felt threatened by communism, crushed the Party in 1931, but again faced strong communist-led worker opposition in the mid-1930s." This coalition of workers and communists was seen as a major challenge throughout the region.

### *The 1940s and 1950s*

Immediately following World War II there was another period of relative political openness. While this period was sometimes short, as in Malaya, and intermittent, as in Thailand, this was a time that saw considerable political change in the region. However, the dynamic force of the period was not socialism or communism, but nationalism. Nationalists and the Left linked to challenge colonialism and expand political space outside the state.

During the Pacific War, the early defeats inflicted on Western colonialists by the Japanese gave strength to the various anti-colonial movements, and clearly showed that loyalty had not been strongly established amongst the subject peoples. The Japanese reinforced this through their propaganda attacking Western colonialism. While Southeast Asians were far from enamoured with Japanese colonialism, and many took up arms to oppose them, the Japanese interregnum set the wheels of decolonisation in motion.<sup>38</sup>

After the defeat of Japan, the colonial powers were slow in re-establishing their administrations, which meant that the Western colonialists were seen to be replacing nationalist administrations. Not only this, but the re-ensconced colonial regimes presided over severely damaged economies. The destruction wrought on Europe meant that the colonies could not be supported, and nationalists and communists were concerned that Southeast Asian colonies would be heavily exploited, but it was clear that any colonial re-establishment would require a greater effort than anything prior to the war. In Thailand, it was felt that the British wanted to establish a *neo-colony*.<sup>39</sup> In other words, not only was much of the economic infrastructure severely damaged, but so were the political and social structures of colonial Asia, and social change was accelerating.

Nationalists saw that the historical tide was running to their advantage. For example, the establishment of the United Nations clearly implied that decolonisation would be on the international agenda. Indeed, moves to decolonisation in the Philippines and India and Pakistan suggested cause for optimism. Interestingly, while the British were leaving South Asia, they appeared keenest to re-establish the colonial regimes of Southeast Asia. Not only did they do this in their own colonies, but they were

instrumental in the reinstatement of colonialism in Indochina and Indonesia." For nationalists, and this included most on the Left, anti-colonialism became the major political issue. Thus, much of the political rhetoric exhibited a strong anti-Western tone.

World War II also saw communists gain considerable credibility through their leading role in anti-Japanese resistance movements. Like their Western predecessors, the Japanese were anti-communists, and vigorously suppressed communist movements, forcing them underground. Yet in Malaya, Singapore, Indochina and the Philippines, communists led or were major elements of the anti-Japanese movement.<sup>41</sup> At the end of the war these movements were in a strong and popular position, and the link between nationalism and communism was well-established.

In addition, the increased international influence of the USSR, based on its role in the European theatre of war, gave the communists considerable cause for optimism. As a founding power in the United Nations, the USSR was able to provide some support for local communists. For example, Thailand wanted to join the UN and required Soviet support, and for this, the USSR sought and received the repeal of Thailand's anti-Communist law in 1946.<sup>42</sup>

One of the many links drawn between nationalists and the left was in the area of economic development. The example of the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Western Europe gave an impetus to the idea of economic planning, suggesting that benefits could be obtained from centralised planning. Nationalists argued that modernisation could only be achieved in the Southeast Asian countries through government investments and planning, thereby strengthening the position of the Left which had long argued for this kind of economic intervention.<sup>43</sup> Economic nationalism became a solid stream of Left and nationalist programmes. In the words of one commentator:

**Indigenism is also influenced by the extent to which the ideology of nationalism is socialist. Independence movements in Southeast Asia, to a substantial degree, were recruited from elements uncommitted by ownership of property or job security. Furthermore, because socialism is identified with social and economic reform in the industrial West, it appeals to nationalist elements whether evolutionary or revolutionary. This appeal is reinforced . . . by the Western socialist tradition of opposition to colonialism.<sup>44</sup>**

This was clear in Burma, Indonesia and, in a more limited way, Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines. In Indonesia, for example, most of the political parties were strongly nationalist and anti-colonialist, and this was reflected in an anti-foreign capital stance. The PKI was opposed to foreign investment, but it tended to be supportive of the role of national capital, while the PSI (Socialist Party) opposed extreme nationalism." Many communists were also greatly heartened by the progress made by the communist parties in Indochina and China.

By 1950, both nationalists and the Left in Southeast Asia must have felt that the tide of history was changing. The Philippines and Indonesia had

gained their independence, albeit by very different routes; Thailand had remained independent; the Chinese communists were in power; the situation in Indochina was in the balance; communists had launched armed struggles in Malaya and Singapore, the Philippines (the Hukbalahap rebellion), Indonesia (the Madiun affair), and **Burma.**<sup>46</sup>

The history of the Left in Southeast Asia often ignores the contribution made by the legal socialist movement. This ignorance stems from the fact that, by the early 1950s, most socialists had taken an anti-communist stance, even amongst those who were at the forefront of the Asian socialist movement. Many presented an unusual position by supporting the Chinese Revolution while opposing communists in Southeast Asia. This group adopted what the then Burmese Prime Minister U Ba Swe called 'revolutionary democratic Socialist methods to improve the standard of living of the masses . . .'. For Josey, 'Asian socialism' was about easing the underdevelopment of the region and the poverty of millions through some form of collectivism. It was interested in social welfare, and socialists 'were nationalists first', opposing colonialism and imperialism by 'democratic, egalitarian and fraternal' methods. Significantly, Asian socialism was opposed to capitalism because of its links with colonialism, but opposed to communism, which it saw as **totalitarian.**<sup>47</sup>

The connection emphasised here, between nationalism, anti-colonialism and socialist and communist movements, was crucial. Of course, the relationship between each of these political elements varied according to local conditions. For example, the PKI, which became the largest communist party in the non-communist world, came to see that:

**the nationalist movement, and later the national state, might be captured by Marxism through peaceful means and, having been captured ideologically, would naturally admit Marxists to positions of power.'**

However, in Malaya, the communists had abandoned peaceful and constitutional opposition to the reinstatement of colonialism, and had embarked on an armed struggle. The MCP was unable, though, to establish fully its struggle as a national movement.

Given the united front tactics commonly used against colonial powers, left-wing influence can easily be exaggerated by conflating it with nationalism and anti-colonialism. However, if socialist revolutions elsewhere have occurred with little or no consent amongst the population to socialist values<sup>49</sup>, and created problems thereafter, then the successful conclusion of nationalist struggles in Southeast Asia certainly did not leave socialist ideas in any better position. The Left was soon moved off the legal political stage. The reason for this had little to do with the success of Left ideology or values, but with the ability of the Left to build links with labour, and in some cases the peasantry, and the West's perception of the success of International Communism.

Working and living conditions had deteriorated during the war, with food and commodity shortages and inflation common. Under such conditions worker unrest increased, with the Left and the anti-colonial movement able to capitalise on this. By 1947, for example, the MCP-dominated Singapore GLU controlled three-quarters of the organised work force. In Thailand, labour organisation increased, and a major labour confederation, the Central Labour Union (CLU) was formed. A new generation of labour leaders, much influenced by Marxism and close to the CPT, emerged to lead the Thai labour unions. Their approach was attractive, and by early 1949, CLU membership was 60,000. In Indonesia, the PKI also had strong links with labour which supported its programme.<sup>99</sup>

The radical wing of the labour movement can be seen as a part of the rise of a more generalised Left discourse. As Reynolds observed for Thailand, '... there was a distinctly Left orientation in Bangkok public discourse for a decade or so after World War II.'<sup>100</sup> This was common throughout the region. For example, in Malaya and Singapore, while the colonial state attempted to repress labour after 1948, this was temporary. The fundamental grievances of students and workers, when combined with the unprecedented strength of anti-colonial feeling, were manifested in a new phase in the development of independent organisations. This involved labour, students and, for the first time, formal political parties which geared-up for the achievement of self-government. The radical unions played a critical role in mobilising the masses in this broad movement. Most of the strikes in Singapore involved demands for the release of imprisoned union officials, or were part of the broader Left strategy of keeping pressure up for full self-government."

Throughout the region, a feature of this period was the linking of a range of politically active groups within civil society. Leftist discourse, especially in labour circles, employed concepts of class, class struggle, and exploitation, seriously challenging colonialist and nationalist rhetoric which emphasised capitalist development. Significantly, whilst the authorities readily employed internal security forces and legislation to detain labour leaders and proscribe cultural and social organisations in which the Left was influential, these moves were not initially successful. Far more repressive measures were required. As labour conflicts continued, governments soon defined these actions as unlawful and as constituting 'revolt', and anti-communist laws were made increasingly draconian. For example, in Thailand, the 1952 Act prevented attacks on the private enterprise system and outlawed acts defined as 'creating instability, disunity, or hatred among the people, and taking part in acts of terrorism or sabotage.'" This did not end labour disputes, but it did restrict Left-wing influence in the labour movement. In the Philippines, once the Left's influence had been reduced, collective bargaining was expanded after 1951.

The seemingly bright prospects for the Left after World War II were tarnished by the Cold War and the rise of US-sponsored anti-communism

and anti-neutrality. As is well-known, the US and other Western powers, shocked by the 'loss' of China and Eastern Europe, and an apparent threat in Korea, moved quickly into the Cold War. Of course, Southeast Asia was not immune from this, being seen to be in the path of a southward movement of communism. As one US policy document explained:

[S]outh of the ominous mass that is Red China, Thailand, along with her embattled but still free neighbours, shares a peninsula. The Communists want it. They covet its riches. . . . They consider it [Thailand] a prize base, for like an orientalscimitar, the peninsula's tip is pointed at the throat of Indonesia. . . . In Malaya, Burma and Indo-China, Communist-led rebels plunder, kill and burn.''

This Cold War mentality translated to support for actively pro-Western and pro-business **governments**. In **Thailand**, for example, the US supported, with the help of the CIA, generals in the police and army who were opposed to the Left. There is no doubt that this support for repressive political structures (the military, police and internal security) was crucial in narrowing the political space, even for democrats and nationalists. **Throughout Southeast Asia** the US supported anti-communists: in Indochina, supporting the French, and then becoming directly involved; against Sukarno and the PKI in Indonesia, championing the military; supporting Magsaysay in the Philippines, against the Huk rebellion; in Burma and Cambodia against leaders defined as 'dangerously neutral'; and in Malaya, supporting the British in their anti-Communist war.

This anti-communism fitted well the domestic agendas of increasingly authoritarian regimes whose repression was justified on the basis of developmental imperatives. The Left was increasingly identified as 'alien' and as a 'fifth column' movement, and this perspective was supported by Western powers. It also found itself having to defend its political **organisations**, developed in the nationalist campaigns, as others moved to **marginalise** them from the political process and weaken their bases in civil society, most notably in trade unions. This absorbed much of the creative energy of socialist and communist movements. Externally, the Cold War climate necessarily meant various pressures would be exerted to undermine socialist economic experiments and shore up market-oriented economies. Thus, by the mid- to **late-1950s**, throughout Southeast Asia, the Left, including anti-Communist socialists who had supported constitutional opposition, was being repressed or forced underground. In many places, repression resulted in an intensification of armed struggles.

### *The 1970s*

During the **1970s**, while not as regionally widespread as during the earlier periods discussed above, there were significant attempts to expand civil society. This took place in a quite different environment from that in earlier epochs: all of the countries of the region were ruled by post-colonial regimes; communist-led armed struggles in the Philippines and Thailand appeared to be gaining strength; and the US intervention in Indochina was

coming to an end, on a wave of opposition in the West. The eventual victories for the communist movements in Indochina initially gave considerable impetus to the Left in Southeast Asia. Again, it should be **emphasised** that much of the opposition which developed was related to conceptions of anti-imperialism and economic stagnation or decline, associated with the first oil shocks.

For example, the extreme dependence of the Singapore economy on external demand meant that the mid-1970s recession hit hard, with heavy job losses in manufacturing industries, with official unemployment reaching 4.6% in 1975. The ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) tame union organisation was unable to effectively represent worker interests, presenting an opportunity for a short-lived revival in the student movement. The students had widened their agenda to include the promotion of civil liberties and links with **workers**. **The** latter prompted a **swift** reaction from the government, resulting in the conviction of student leaders for 'unlawful assembly' and 'rioting' and the student union having its funds placed under the control of the university administration and Ministry of Education. The student union was barred from engaging in or making pronouncements on matters of a political **nature**.<sup>53</sup>

The role of students in Singapore was seemingly part of a pattern throughout the region. Between the late sixties and 1975, students were active in most of the countries of the region: in Indonesia, students protested Japanese economic domination; in the Philippines, students were active until martial law was introduced in late 1972, with the breakaway Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines formed by student leaders and intellectuals in 1968; and in Malaysia, students demonstrated in 1974. The most remarkable student activism was, however, in Thailand in 1973, where students and intellectuals brought thousands of people into the streets to overthrow a military dictatorship.

Such student activism grew, in part, out of a massive expansion of tertiary education, but also out of the changes taking place in social structures through the growth of import-substituting industrialisation. Regional governments, however, having observed Western students challenging their own governments in the late 1960s, were decidedly uncomfortable with the prospect of student radicalism which they saw as subversive and manipulated by the Left. The result was that **many** took the Singapore road, introducing repressive measures.

These student activists did not operate in a vacuum, and the example of Thailand showed that students and intellectuals could be powerful forces for the expansion of political space. Indeed, the growth of solidarity movements between students, workers, peasants and the downtrodden was greatly feared by the governments of the region, especially as students were seen as allies of the communists. But, by the late 1970s, authoritarian governments had again moved to close the political opening, and **repres-**

sive regimes dominated the political stage throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s: the Marcos dynasty and its lackeys kept the pressure on through martial law, although some concessions were made; Thailand had a military government again, although limited elections were reintroduced in the early 1980s; New Order Indonesia was still under a **military-dominated** government, and Suharto appeared stronger than ever; Lee and the PAP had further entrenched themselves in Singapore, having arrested more than 100 'communists' and harassed all legal opposition; and the Malaysian government had cracked down on opposition groups.

For the Left, the only glimmer of hope in this political gloom might have been the establishment of self-declared socialist governments in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia and the expansion of communist-led rebellions in Thailand and the Philippines. But this came to nothing. In Cambodia, the Pol Pot regime embarked on a reign of terror and **hyper-nationalism** which, while initially supported by many on the Left, was only concluded when Vietnam invaded. The result of this was a brief but bloody war between China and Vietnam, which threw most of the Left in Southeast Asia into **confusion**.<sup>18</sup> This confusion was amplified by the strange sight of the US and ASEAN supporting their former enemy, the murderous Khmer Rouge.

These strange events also had much to do with the implosion of the CPT. In 1977 the CPT could claim more than 15,000 under its banner, and was waging an armed struggle, apparently with considerable success, reinforced by thousands who had fled right-wing repression after the 1976 coup. However, the CPT, dominated by a leadership allied to China, had been unable to incorporate the young and idealistic revolutionaries from urban areas. In supporting the Khmer Rouge and China, the CPT lost its bases in Vietnam and Laos, and then 'lost' its internal debate with students and intellectuals who willingly accepted a government amnesty. By the early 1980s, the CPT was dead. Only in the Philippines, where antagonism to Marcos united the opposition in a way not seen since the War, did an armed struggle continue and grow. Even here, however, there were splits within the Party<sup>19</sup>

It should also be noted that the changing nature of international production had a major impact in the region. The tendency of international capital, beginning in the 1960s, was to transfer labour-intensive manufacturing production to the developing world to exploit lower labour costs. Not only did this boost economic growth in East Asia (Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea), but it also proved timely for Southeast Asia. For example, following the mid-1960s failure of the political merger with Malaysia, Singapore's **policy-makers realised** that with no prospect for a larger market for manufactured goods – the basis of Singapore's import-substitution industrialisation (ISI) strategy – a different strategy was required. Singapore led the way, to be followed by Malaysia, Thailand

and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia and the Philippines, in moving to a more export-oriented industrialisation (EOI) strategy.

Such a move in production did not cause any decline of the Left; indeed, since the move from ISI to EOI actually expanded the industrial work force, it might have been expected this would enhance the Left's political potential. However, as the region's states moved to create their comparative advantage as low wage manufacturing sites, independent unions were smashed, seriously weakening the Left."

At the same time, three other nails appeared poised to be driven into the coffin of the Left in Southeast Asia: first, the move to 'market socialism' in China; second, the political and economic collapse in Eastern Europe; and third, the amazing economic success of the capitalist Southeast Asian countries (with the Philippines the exception), in stark contrast to the stagnation of the Indochina countries. But, as we have already suggested, this is not the end of history, and there is reason to embark on a deeper analysis of political and economic change and the opportunities this provides for the Left.

### *The Left and Contemporary Southeast Asia*

As noted at the beginning of this essay, the 1980s and 1990s appear bleak for the Left in Southeast Asia. This is a paradox; think about the most enduring of Left strategies—support of labour. As we have noted, this area of activism has been seen by various kinds of regimes as a powerful threat. If, however, we examine the rapid economic development of Southeast Asia, driven by strong, local, capitalist classes, then the current epoch *should* suggest an *opportunity* for the Left, organising among the growing working class. As yet, this has not been the case. Why?

An important point to emphasise is that changes to the global political economy have facilitated a positive capitalist alternative for developing countries which has greatly undercut socialism's potential appeal in the region. One of these was, of course, the search by international capital for the low-cost manufacturing export bases which began in the 1960s. More recently, the conceptualisation by international capital of the global economy in terms of three economic regions—Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific—has meant a 'regional focus'.<sup>25</sup> This emphasises the importance of honing operations to the peculiarities of local markets and affords more autonomy to transnational corporations (TNC) subsidiaries. Consequently, Asia is elevated from the status of a site for low-cost production to be exported to consumer markets elsewhere to a crucial set of markets in its own right. Commensurate with this is a preparedness by transnational corporations (TNC) to invest in higher value-added products and processes—both within and beyond the manufacturing sector—than was previously the case. In conjunction with the internationalisation of capital emanating from the region and the forging of structural linkages

between the different regional economies, this investment pattern further bolsters capitalism in the region.

This process appears to be deepening capitalist accumulation, giving rise to a capital development alternative in Southeast Asia.<sup>60</sup> For the argument here, the significant issue is that remarkable capitalist economic development (with the exception of the Philippines) has been achieved with associated authoritarianism. Indeed, Southeast Asian leaders have used economic success to boost their political legitimacy and to justify authoritarian regimes in Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia.

So it is not just the negative example of state-led socialist experiments around the world that has reduced the appeal of socialism in Southeast Asia, but the demonstrable achievements of capitalism in Asia and the seemingly bright prospects it holds for the future. This has been especially noticeable in Thailand. Many of those who joined the CPT in the 1970s and 1980s have returned to urban life to become successful business people, suggesting that communism was a dead-end. They argue that the best they can now hope for is a capitalism with some heart, meaning that some of its rough, exploitative edges are taken off. In essence, 'socialism as collectivism' is no longer a supportable goal, even for some on the Left, and has been replaced by a growing interest in more limited but laudable political goals including human rights, liberty, constitutions, and representative forms.

Paradoxically, it is the success of capitalist revolutions and the decline of socialist models which have raised the prospect of political change. The social transformations in Southeast Asian societies have not only involved the expansion of capitalist and working classes, but the emergence of sizeable middle classes, with each of these classes being segmented.<sup>61</sup> The social, political and cultural manifestations of this process are complex, and there is a literature which sees pressures for new organisational forms to protect and advance the particular interests of these strata as an unavoidable byproduct of economic development.

As we have already argued, the historical evidence contradicts the assumption that the development of civil society in capitalist societies is a progressive and incremental outcome of economic growth. Rather, civil society has ebbed and flowed in the region throughout this century. For us, the significance of the current social transformations brought by advanced forms of capitalist accumulation lies in the nature of new social groups. As we have seen, at different periods in the respective histories of Southeast Asian societies, a range of social groups have succeeded in expanding the political space outside the state, even if this space has subsequently been closed as authoritarian regimes have reasserted their dominance.

Whereas independent labour organisations have been central to this periodic reconstitution of civil society in the past, what is significant in the current expansion of civil society is the greater social differentiation

characterising the groups involved. It is important to acknowledge the expanding complexity of Southeast Asian social structures. The increasingly numerous and differentiated middle class, encompasses a range of professionals, public and private bureaucrats and the self-employed. The growth of this class is generated out of expanded capitalist development, which also sees an ever more complex bourgeois class engaged in diverse domestic and global accumulation strategies. Not surprisingly, these processes generate new political aspirations and demands, some of which reflect the new material conditions. Hence, environmental and consumer organisations have joined professional and employer associations to establish their identity in civil society.

From the **mid-1980s**, there has been a rapid expansion of business and professional organisations in many parts of Southeast Asia. In Indonesia and Thailand at least, some of these groups have achieved considerable power. A new literature, much of it placing a heavy emphasis on instrumental relationships between business and government, has emerged in recent years. **MacIntyre** has demonstrated that industry associations and business groups have been able to use the Indonesian state's corporatist structures to derive benefits which are for their members, and not for the state. This, he argues, involves an expansion of political representation. For Thailand, MacIntyre suggests that the representation of organised business on joint government bodies has allowed it to deal directly and independently with government and shape policy. Anek, also writing on Thailand, argues that business associations have become autonomous of the state, acting as interest groups, that organised business has had a significant influence on the pattern of economic development, and that like '... South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore', there are '... close and supportive relations between the government and organized business...'

Even in Singapore, and despite the government's brusque treatment of non-state groups in the 1980s, notably the Law Society and lay religious organisations, some middle-class and professional organisations have emerged or become more active in recent years. The most notable of these have been the Nature Society of Singapore, the Association of Women for Action and Research, and the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP). The evolution of these three groups reflects a perception that existing political structures inadequately accommodate distinctive views and interests.

As we stressed earlier, following Bernhard, the existence of autonomous organisations requires the sanction of the state. This means that the existence of some of these organisations can be highly conditional: as soon as the state defines their activities as political, they are in trouble. This is especially so in the Singapore case, where legislation means they face the threat of de-registration should they be seen to pose a challenge to the

PAP's authority by acting 'politically'. Equally, the threat of being co-opted by the government is real, as the AMP in Singapore demonstrates. The threat of co-option and corporatism has meant that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between state and non-state organisations. For example, in Thailand, the government ordered the establishment of provincial chambers of commerce, while claiming that they are private and voluntary.

Nevertheless, and despite the moderate political objectives of many of these organisations, some do represent attempts to negotiate increased political space, separate from the state's extensive bureaucratic structures. Through the demarcation of this non-state space, some form of political contestation becomes possible. This is true even if, in order to avoid proscription and co-optation, contestation can neither be confrontational nor particularly public. Even so, owing to the class nature of the constituencies and leaderships of these organisations, being disproportionately middle class, contestation will inevitably be circumspect. Many of them also proclaim, as they must, a non-ideological position, and it is fair to say that they see themselves in this light.

At the same time, the position of independent labour organisations has substantially altered. In the past, linkages between labour and political opposition movements have posed a challenge to authoritarian regimes, both colonial and post-colonial. But the legacy of decades of authoritarian rule has been seriously destabilising for labour. The institutionalised incorporation of labour into the structures of the state is now well advanced throughout the region, and the existence of independent labour organisations is everywhere threatened.

Today, the under-privileged, who are not often wage labourers, find their interests being represented by groups outside labour movements. NGOs are not only leading this, but are also critical avenues for expanding the political space of civil society. Significantly, though, the agendas and constituencies of such independent organisations do not afford labour the control and influence offered by trade unions. None of this rules out the possibility of the Left shaping politics in contemporary Southeast Asia, but it does suggest that the sites of struggle will be varied, as will the political alliances involving the Left. Neither are the sites of struggle necessarily going to be the constitutional oppositions and political parties. After all, the experience in Southeast Asia has been that parliaments and elections do not necessarily mean increased popular representation. The rise of capitalism, middle classes and electoral politics can increase representation for some classes, but not necessarily for the masses.<sup>64</sup>

In Southeast Asia there are various opposition groups and movements outside this narrow, party political focus, and many of these operate in a manner which distinguishes them from the influence or lobby groups so central in liberal-pluralist democratic theory. Specifically, they are activist

and do not appear to act as more or less narrow advocacy groups, for they **marshall** support from a range of groups and classes in society. Good examples of this kind of non-state group are the activist development NGOs which have become important political actors since the early 1980s.

There has been considerable enthusiasm concerning the political potential of NGOs. For example Jones, writing of Southeast Asia, argues that:

. . . NGOs . . . have been chipping away at entrenched power structures. . . . [T]hey have played a critical role in forcing governments to listen to the demands of the poor, the marginalised and the abused.<sup>65</sup>

Not all analysts are so enthusiastic, pointing out that many NGOs are not non-governmental at all, having been co-opted by government, and noting that many are self-interested and **self-promoting**.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the roles of NGOs in Southeast Asia vary, from the high profile activism of NGOs in the Philippines and Thailand, to a more moderate role in Indonesia and Malaysia, very limited in Singapore, to virtual non-existence in Burma and Laos. Even allowing for this, the political role of NGOs has been remarkable.

In theory, NGOs are defined as voluntary and **non-profit** associations with development-oriented goals. Therefore, NGOs are not necessarily defined as political opposition by governments, at least initially. **Indeed**, NGOs often shy away from institutionalised relationships with political parties, arguing that political parties can be no more than allies of NGOs, not their **leaders**.<sup>67</sup> However, as NGOs have matured and so-called grassroots development strategies have emerged, so their political role has been delineated. While not all NGOs are politically radical, in Southeast Asia, many have experienced a degree of radicalisation.

It is often argued that this radicalisation is due to the nature of their development activities. Sasono points out that most NGOs are not 'the grassroots', and in fact are most often drawn from 'urban intellectuals and middle class groups', and the NGOs are certainly not social movements. Despite this, he argues that they act in a **class-biased** manner, working for the poor, and taking risks, knowing the economic and political costs involved.<sup>68</sup>

A new development 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, as poverty has a lot to do with powerlessness. NGOs have learnt that development projects are more successful ' . . . if they are based on people's own analysis of the problems they face and their **solutions**'.<sup>69</sup> In essence, this suggests an approach to participation, representation and collective action, where political action on a national or even international stage is necessary.

In other words, their ideology and methodologies create an imperative for NGOs to expand the political space at all levels of their operations. As has been demonstrated in all of the countries of Southeast Asia, this can involve the building of oppositional coalitions between unions, development groups, women, religious groups, and environmentalists. Most importantly, and like the Left in earlier periods, NGOs assist dissidents by maintaining an intellectual life, providing space for ideological **debate**.<sup>30</sup>

The oppositional status of NGOs is demonstrated where authoritarian regimes have been replaced by more representative forms, such as in Thailand, the Philippines. In Thailand, NGOs played leading and co-ordinating 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." Significantly, following these events, many of the NGOs still find themselves having to challenge government at all levels, supporting the poor and arguing for greater representation and participation in policy-making at **all** levels. Much of this tension between NGOs and governments arises from differing approaches to development.

### Concluding Remarks

In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, capitalism has not had a complete victory. Rather, with the rapid maturation of capitalism, the social shortcomings and contradictions of market relations increasingly manifest themselves in political problems for governments in the region. Many of the existing conflicts and disputes in Southeast Asia are fundamentally about the naked exploitation and oppression of capitalism, both in the human and environmental dimensions. Where economic development is most advanced, increased conspicuous consumption only highlights material inequalities. Heightened resentment of authoritarian political structures amongst the relatively-privileged classes is also evident. Indeed, the demands people are making are not for socialism, but for representation in policy-making. It is this dynamic which underlies the recent development of independent organisations and the push for an expanded civil society. Socialism, of course, has much to say about issues of representation and participation, and these concepts are not necessarily linked in the public mind to capitalism.

Current attempts in Southeast Asia to create an expanded sphere of public political space thus have a special significance for the **Left**. At this point in time, such a development offers the best avenue for mounting a challenge to the values of capitalism-and, most importantly, contesting the power structures in support of that system. The extension of non-state political space is a necessary precondition for any such challenge to be effective, though not in itself indicative of it. It still remains that struggle

within non-state organisations is required to ensure Left values and agenda are advanced, and certainly some organisations are more favourable arenas for the Left than others.

As we have seen in this discussion, there are some emerging non-state organisations whose class composition predisposes them toward rather limited forms of contestation over state power. They are jockeying within the political system to operate as interest or lobby groups and are vulnerable to co-optation. Others, namely the activist **NGOs**, demonstrate broader objectives and are more removed from the constitutional political process. To the extent that the latter exploit their location in civil society to agitate for an empowerment of underprivileged classes, they represent a force for substantive democracy, and one through which left values can be promoted. Whilst these organisations do not constitute social or political movements, they have the potential to precipitate them through the legitimation of class-based action. In this sense, they are not so much alternatives to more traditional Left organisations, such as trade unions, as complements to them.

The economic triumph of capitalism in Southeast Asia, then, does not close off democratic possibilities; nor, however, does it set in train an inexorable, even if protracted, force for political pluralism. Rather, it represents another historical opportunity for the establishment of a more expansive civil society. This, in turn, creates the possibility of politically contesting the exercise of state power from outside the formal political structures of the state itself. Certainly we are a long way short of realising that possibility, but if this is a priority of the Left, current political developments in Southeast Asia are nowhere near as depressing as their surface appearances suggest.

It might be that on this occasion the political space will be more resilient and less vulnerable to repression than it has been in the past. A possible reason for this is that important elements within the capitalist and middle classes appear to be supportive of the current expansion of political space and increased representation for their interests. This is an added dimension, because in the past the dominant classes were often supportive of authoritarian reversals, since they perceived the push for increased political space as being led by working class organisations, supported by communists and socialists.

We believe that these political changes offer great potential for the Left in Southeast Asia. Like Wood, we feel that the time is ripe for those on the Left to provide the definitive critique of **capitalism**.<sup>72</sup> At present, however, the Left is not doing this. Rather, the expanded political space is being dominated by organisations of the middle class and capitalists. The Left should present its critique of capitalism and its class analysis by forming alliances with the progressive elements of Southeast Asian politics. This might be achieved if those on the Left bring their skills and analysis to the

membership of many progressive groups – quite a different strategy from that in previous epochs, when the communist and socialist parties were in the progressive vanguard.

### NOTES

1. One of their answers was, 'We all got stoned and it drifted away.' Greg **Macainsh** wrote 'Whatever Happened to the Revolution for Skyhooks', *Living in the 70s* Sydney, Mushroom Records, 1974.
2. The use of 'Left' is not meant to submerge the very real differences between communists and socialists in Southeast Asia. Aspects of this will be discussed below.
3. We are not entering the debate on social movements. It remains to be assessed whether any of the groups discussed for Southeast Asia constitute social movements – see the definition in Alan Scott, *Ideology and the New Social Movements* London, **Unwin Hyman**, 1990, p. 6.
4. See Lucien Pye. 'Political Science and the Crisis of Authoritarianism', *American Political Science Review* 84 (1) 1990, pp. 3–19, and Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.
5. John Girling, 'Development and Democracy in southeast Asia', *The Pacific Review* 1 (4), 1988, pp. 332–6. The quotations are all drawn from p.332.
6. Richard **Robison** 'Authoritarian States, Capital-Owning Classes, and the Politics of Newly Industrializing Countries: the Case of Indonesia', *World Politics* 41 (1), 1988, pp. 52–74, and **Nigel** Harris, 'New Bourgeoisies', *The Journal of Development Studies* 24 (2), 1988, pp. 237–49.
7. Girling, p. 337.
8. Stephanie **Lawson**, 'Conceptual Issues in the Comparative Study of Regime Change and Democratization', *Comparative Politics* 25 (2), 1993, pp. 192–3.
9. Girling, pp.333–4.
10. **Justus M. van der Kroef**, 'Introduction: Structure and Theoretical Analysis of Opposition Movements in Southeast Asia', *Journal of Asian Affairs* 9 (Special Studies No. 154), 1984, p. 15.
11. Michael Bernhard, 'Civil Society and Democratic Transition in East Central Europe', *Political Science Quarterly* 108 (2), 1993, pp. 307,326.
12. Civic groups may occasionally become politically active. For example, such associations might attempt to influence public policy in narrow ways, however removed from formal political processes they may be. It should also be noted that some civic organisations can often play important class functions. For example, sporting clubs might provide for solidarity among workers.
13. Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'The Uses and Abuses of "Civil Society"', in *Socialist Register* 1990 London, The Merlin Press, 1990, p. 74.
14. Bernhard, p. 326.
15. **Dietrich** Rueschemeyer, et. al., *Capitalist Development and Democracy* Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, p. 274. The quotation is from p. 49.
16. Bernhard, pp. 308–9.
17. We are very much aware that the interpretation we propose here is new, and requires far more research and documentation than we can provide in this essay. Here, we can only suggest some lines that further research might take up.
18. Cora Du Bois, *Social Forces in Southeast Asia* Cambridge, **Harvard** University Press, 1962, pp. 42–4.
19. B.G. Gafurov and G.F. Kim (eds.), *Lenin and National Liberation in the East* Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 385.
20. Du Bois, p. 45.
21. See Reynaldo **Ileto**, 'Religion and Anti-Colonial Movements', in Nicholas **Tarling** (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Volume 2 Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 197–248, and Carl A. Trocki, 'Political Structures in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in **Tarling** (ed.) p. 85.

22. J.M. Pluvier, *South-East Asia from Colonialism to Independence* Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 15–21, 72–91, and John Bastin and Harry J. Benda, *A History of Modern Southeast Asia* Sydney, Prentice-Hall, 1977, pp. 95–7. In the Philippines, the struggle was over the extension of voting and representation.
23. C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819–1975* Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 134, and Chua Beng Huat, 'The Changing Shape of Civil Society in Singapore', *Commentary* 11 (1), 1993, pp. 9–10.
24. David Joel Steinberg et. al., *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* New York, Praeger, 1971, p. 251.
25. Steinberg et. al., pp. 275–6, 290–8, 326.
26. See M.R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya* London, Oxford, 1970, p. 34, Andrew Brown, 'The Industrial Working Class and the State in Thailand: An Introductory Analysis', M.A. Thesis, The Australian National University, 1990.
27. Trocki, p. 85.
28. It is worth pointing out that the so-called 'intermediate groups' were not particularly significant in this period largely due to the nature of the economy. Trade and government service were the employers of these professional groups, but these sectors did not require large work forces, and many who did occupy these positions were expatriate professionals or privileged locals. This meant they were unlikely to fill the ranks of the anti-colonial movement, although there were some significant exceptions.
29. Brown, pp. 30–73.
30. See Turnbull, *passim*, and G. William Skinner, *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand* Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1958.
31. Justus M. van der Kroef, *Communism in South-East Asia* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, pp. 4–7, and Robert Cribb, 'The Indonesian Marxist Tradition', in Colin Mackerras and Nick Knight (eds.), *Marxism in Asia* New York, St. Martin's Press, 1985, p. 251.
32. On the Comintern, see Nick Knight, 'Leninism, Stalinism and the Comintern', in Mackerras and Knight (eds.), pp. 53–59, and Frank Moraes, *Yonder One World. A Study of Asia and the West* New York, Macmillan, 1958, pp. 45–47. For Indonesia, see Cribb, pp. 253–6, while for Thailand, see Scot Banne, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993, Ch. 4.
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