

# RELIGION AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Over the last 50 years, religion has played a central role in some of Southeast Asia's most important mass mobilisations and political transitions. Cardinal Jaime Sin, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, and the Church-supported National Movement for Free Elections played pivotal roles in the culmination of the People Power movement and collapse of the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. In the following decades, Buddhist monks and associations led anti-military demonstrations in Thailand and Myanmar. In Thailand, a year after a successful 1991 coup, the military was forced out of power under pressure from 'black May' demonstrations led by Chamlong Srimuang, a key figure in the controversial Asoke Buddhist movement, while in Myanmar, public protests organised around the marches of Buddhist monks were a key part of the 2007 Saffron Revolution.

These examples of the powerful potential of religious civil society to oppose authoritarian rule, however, are not exhaustive of the relationship among religion, civil society, and the state. In fact, even within the recent histories of these three countries, examples of more complex relations between religion and politics can be found. In the Philippines, since 1986, Church leadership has been unable to 'create countervailing social institutions or structures that would effectively shield the nation-state and its bureaucracy from vicious inter-elite struggle' (Cartagenas 2010, 857). In Thailand, 15 years after bringing an end to military rule, Chamlong's new Asoke political force, the so-called Dharma Army, turned against the democratically elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. They joined instead the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy mass demonstrations that led to Thaksin's being deposed in 2006 (Heikkilä-Horn 2010). Finally, in Myanmar, less than a decade after the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the Buddhist monk-led Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion (*Ma Ba Tha*) became a powerful movement for Buddhist nationalism and participated in creating a set of four laws on religion and race that restricted religious freedom in Myanmar (Walton 2015).

From these examples, it is clear that the relationship among religion, civil society, and the state is in constant flux in Southeast Asia. As with all other kinds of civil society, some religious actors and organisations, even if they are autonomous from the state, may openly support aspects of autocratic rule and existing elite networks. Moreover, religious associations within civil society are just as capable as any other

kind of associations within civil society of reaffirming ‘a dominant bloc of social forces and its political, economic, moral, and cultural hegemonic aspirations’ (Hedman 2005, 10).

The aim of this chapter is to introduce and examine the complexities of what I will refer to as ‘religious civil society’ in Southeast Asia. In the process, I will focus on the normative resources provided by organised religion. Regardless of political orientation or outcome, formations of civil society in Southeast Asia often draw on aspects of religious life and thought. The concept of religious civil society presumes that religious associations are part of civil society more generally. Associational aspects of religious civil society span a range of activities from the communal enactment of religious practice to the provision of local services, or the organisation of humanitarian assistance in times of crisis. What differentiates religious civil society from other forms of civil society is the normative valence of religious associational life. These normative dimensions in this case reflect what José Casanova refers to as normative aspects of the development of ‘public religion ... when religion enters the public sphere of civil society to raise normative issues, participating in ongoing processes of normative contestation’ (2001, 1048).

Exploring this normative dimension further, this chapter first addresses the domain of religion in Southeast Asian states more generally, focusing on the effects of state interventions in religion. The lack of autonomy of religion in the region has important effects not only on the possibilities for religious associational life, but also on the kinds of normative resources that enter into public circulation and the contestation that shapes public religious discourse. Next, this chapter will examine the varied normative resources that shape religious civil society, with an emphasis on the conceptual transformations that they make possible. Finally, this chapter will examine the subjectivities and social and legal exclusions that shape religious civil society in Southeast Asia today.

With the aim of examining the relationship between religion and civil society in as broad a manner as possible, I will not provide an exclusive definition of the concept of religious civil society, for several reasons. Established and formally recognised religious associations in Southeast Asia do not account for the entirety of religious experience in the region. In addition, in Southeast Asia, religious associational life falls along a spectrum regarding its proximity to the state. Perhaps most important is the distinction that has emerged between civil and uncivil forms of civil society to explain the growing ‘anti-democracy turn in civil society’ in the region (Thorn 2016, 521; Beittinger-Lee 2009). It is likely that within some religious groups, a number of competing political or religious orientations will be active. Relying on the binary categorisation of civil and uncivil to describe these orientations, therefore, may be insufficient. Conservative and nationalist religious associations have been included in this chapter and in the definition of religious civil society even though their stated beliefs and activism may result in the limitation of space for civil society. It will be argued that their inclusion is important in order to examine the normative contestations that shape civil society.

### **The space of religious civil society**

The approach developed above builds upon the characterisation of civil society Weiss and Hansson provide in the introduction to this volume, as a ‘*space* open to the full range of ideas and organisations’ that emerges from the complexities of politics and civil society on the ground across the region. The benefit of conceptualising civil society as a space is that it avoids insisting upon strict divides between civil and political society and

civil and uncivil associational life. However, the spatial nature of religion is a unique quality that requires a brief consideration.

There is a spatial aspect to religious practice both in the physical structures of communal practice as well as in the embodied nature of piety. All aspects of civil society have some spatial presence, whether we consider the meeting spaces of civil society organisations or the public mobilisation of civil society groups for some purpose. However, the sites of religious gathering or practice – for instance mosques, churches, temples, hospitals, or religious schools – are all usually permanent structures and communal enactments of religious identity. These religious sites are also, in some ways, versatile, providing the spaces for either religious or secular activities (in the case of humanitarian assistance, or even in the renting out of churches for other associational activities not affiliated with a congregation).

It must be noted that the continuous ‘publicness’ of religious architecture, the plurality that religious buildings present, does not automatically translate into civility. These spaces of civil society do not necessarily produce the ‘neighbourliness’ that Valerie Lewis, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert Putnam have suggested is one key outcome of religious social networks (Lewis et al. 2013). Inversely, in closed political systems, such as Vietnam, some religious civility may occur through underground religious gatherings that may take place in secluded spaces and purposely avoid public exposure. In any case, examining the ‘composition of the space’ of civil society, to return to Weiss and Hansson’s approach, draws attention to the spatial quality of religious associational life.

### **Religion’s autonomy from the state**

In Southeast Asia, both the space of civil society and the spaces of religion(s) have been shaped by relentless incursions by colonial and postcolonial states. Interventions in religion, whether focused on religious institutions, practice, or identity, will shape how religious associations form as well as the parameters of public religious discourse in which religious associations function. As Hedman has concluded, ‘the relative autonomy of religious institutions from the apparatuses of the state shapes the potential for opposing incumbent regimes in the spirit of “civil religion”’ (2001, 924). States can sanction some forms of public religiosity and ban other forms; the same is true for religious organisations.

State bureaucracies actively intervene in the domain of religion, potentially shaping everything from the institutional organisation of religions to the practice of family law and the content of religious education (Azmil 2019; Larsson 2018; Peletz 2002). At the same time, however, normative claims made in the name of religion, whether by civil or uncivil society actors, can pressure these bureaucracies. Religion, defined as broadly as possible, becomes both the object of politics and the object of the state’s authority as well as potentially a source for political change or contestation. This is especially the case in countries where struggles for religious freedom are tied to broader struggles for democracy. Comparing the relations between religion and politics across Southeast Asia’s Muslim- and Buddhist-majority countries demonstrates the importance of state interventions in religion.

According to Andreas Ufen, in order to understand the trajectory of Islamisation and religious mobilisation in Indonesia and Malaysia, it is necessary to recognise the vacillating relations among the state, political parties, and civil society (2009, 309).

These relations are discussed in detail in Ufen's chapter in this volume. In Indonesia, Islamic civil society has been important in limiting the state's role in Islamisation. However, conservative Islamist associations have also been active in driving recent Islamist mobilisations, such as the protests against former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama in 2017. In contrast, in Malaysia, federal and state Islamic administrations and the political competition between two of the country's largest Malay-Muslim parties (United Malays National Organisation, UMNO, and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS) are responsible for active state interventions into Islamic practice (Ufen 2009). The government has also relied on government-sponsored Islamist/*dakwah* organisations for political ends. For instance, under Prime Minister Najib Razak's government, UMNO cultivated ties to the ultranationalist Organisation for the Empowerment of the Indigenous Peoples of Malaysia (PERKASA), a group which publicly supported UMNO's calls for increased Islamisation (Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad 2014, 67). In Brunei, by contrast, the absolute monarchy has drastically limited the space for associational life and has prevented public discussion of religion.

Similar relations can be found among the region's Buddhist-majority states of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Although in all these cases, states have sought to manage and shape the Buddhist *sangha*, the activism of monks in each country, and the relationship between the *sangha* and the state. According to Duncan McCargo, in Myanmar and in Vietnam, which has a substantial Buddhist minority, 'monks have played an active role both in anti-colonialist movements and in postcolonial anti-government protests', whereas, 'in Thailand, as in Laos and Cambodia, the *sangha* has regularly been enlisted by the state to mobilize Buddhism as a legitimating force for the task of nation building' (2004, 156). In Thailand, the relationship of Theravada Buddhism to the contemporary state is a product of both royal policies centralising authority over the *sangha* in the late 19th century under the absolute monarchy and 20th-century efforts (both royal and authoritarian) to craft a national ideology in which Buddhism is essential (Somchai 2011, 32–36). This is in stark contrast to the activist, Mahayana Buddhist notion of 'socially engaged Buddhism' that emerged as part of the anti-war movement in Vietnam in the 1960s (Sulak 2015).

The role of religion within national ideologies in Southeast Asia is one instance in which the proximity of religion to the state has direct effects on the social and political possibilities for religious associations. Many of the region's national ideologies have important religious components, such as the belief in a monotheistic god found in Malaysia's *Rukun Negara* (National Principles) or Indonesia's *Pancasila* (Five Principles); the centrality of Islam to Brunei's sovereign philosophy, defined as *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy); or in the configuration of monarchy, nation, and religion in Thailand. National ideologies can also limit the public positions that religious civil society can take – or, to the contrary, they may provide a broad basis from which religious leaders or groups can have substantial influence in national politics.

The example of Pancasila in Indonesia demonstrates how religious civil society's relation to a national ideology can change over time. Pancasila, Indonesia's national ideology, was created in 1945 to preserve the unity of the new postcolonial state. Under the Suharto regime from 1965 to 1998, Pancasila served as the ideological justification for 'systematically disorganizing civil society' as political parties and labour unions were forcibly consolidated and the formation of new parties and civil society organisations was banned (Hadiz 2004, 156). Over the last decade, and especially under the government of President Joko Widodo, Pancasila has been revived as a nationalist ideology.

Despite being used to limit the potential of Islamist political groups and parties under Suharto's authoritarian rule, Islamic mass organisations Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have increasingly defended Pancasila, in part as a means of countering growing Islamist challenges that threaten the established religious authority of these two groups (Iskandar 2016, 726). In fact, increasingly, the government has turned to Pancasila to remove potentially threatening Islamist groups. The government banned the 'uncivil' Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia group in July 2017 under a new government regulation on mass organisations. Formally, the move to ban Hizbut Tahrir was based on the group's rejection of Pancasila (Hilmy 2020).

Beyond formal national ideologies, religious organisations may be subject to state or elite capture, including forms of state corporatism (Lorch 2021). Actors within religious civil society may face important political decisions of whether to directly engage with or oppose state policies. In certain instances, religious groups may seek out connections to the state or political elites. Under other circumstances, these same civil society groups could actively choose to avoid appearing to oppose a government's policies or campaigns. For instance, in the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte's drug war posed significant challenges for both Catholic and non-Catholic Christian churches that were often constrained in their ability to organise or speak out against ongoing violence.<sup>1</sup>

Church reactions to the drug war provide an example of the varying orientations towards the state found within religious civil society. In framing their analysis of local non-Catholic Christian organisations' responses to Duterte's drug war, Cornelio and Medina argue that local church leadership, or Christian groups, define their relation to state authority in ways that are 'largely informed by how Christian groups see themselves as formidable institutions in their respective communities' (2019, 156). In instances in which there is limited space for religious activism, Christian groups' 'public engagements are theologically driven' in order to avoid political or legal challenges. Thus, the nature of the space of civil society, especially at the local level, can lead to groups' calibrating the religiosity of their public claims.

Formal national church leaderships, even of non-Catholic churches, will face similar challenges when grappling with pressures from the state and elite networks while also facing the expectation that religious civil society act as a moral force. This is exemplified by the Catholic Church's political relations with the state at the onset of the drug war. Jasmin Lorch suggests that the Catholic Church's initial delay in criticising the drug war was in part due to the fact that 'the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) had been a friend of Duterte from the diocese of Davao' (2021, 90). Although this did not shield Church leaders from significant threats by Duterte, these kinds of personal relationships between political elites and religious leadership may, over the long term, add to the survivability of religious organisations. Religious organisations may benefit from political patronage. However, as in this case, such connections may pose challenges to their autonomy.

Those religious civil society groups without sufficient political sponsorship, on the contrary, may find it difficult to survive, despite achieving a considerable amount of autonomy. Kikue Hamayotsu has explained the dwindling influence of Islamic liberalism in Indonesia after only a decade by pointing out that civil society activists advancing Islamic liberalism in the early post-Suharto period had few connections to influential political actors or parties in contrast to their conservative civil society rivals, who were able to survive and grow during the same time (2013, 667). By contrast, the well-established success of women's rights and legal-activist group Sisters in

Islam in Malaysia demonstrates that, even within more autocratic conditions, religious civil society can find successful strategies to carry out oppositional activities related to highly controversial issues, for instance, related to the reform of Islamic family law, without the direct protection of political parties or state elites (Saliha 2003, 109). In a limited number of instances, such as in opposition to the now repealed Internal Security Act, Muslim NGOs have been able to work with non-Malay-Muslim NGOs, despite the power of social divides and political polarisation in Malaysia (Weiss 2006, 184).

In addition to these ideological and political constraints on the autonomy of religion, in some cases, the very conceptualisation of civil society in religious terms can reflect the lack of autonomy of both religion and civil society. For instance, from the 1990s to the 2000s, Malay-Muslim UMNO elites actively influenced new Islamic conceptualisations of civil society, in particular '*masyarakat madani*' ('civil society'), and, under former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, created the concept of 'civilisational Islam', or '*Islam hadhari*'. Norani Othman has suggested that in Malaysia, 'the working understanding of *masyarakat madani* among ethnic Malay leaders was that civil society supports the objectives of the democratically elected government rather than fostering political autonomy and social initiative as common practice' (2008, 127). Within this particular framing of *masyarakat madani*, the task of civil society is not to engender an autonomous politics, but rather to organise and manage consent for state initiatives.

### Religion and normative resources for civil society

Not all instances of religious conceptualisations of civil society are aligned with state initiatives. In fact, just as religious associations can have an array of orientations towards the state and other political actors, religions provide a variety of normative resources to sustain, or in some cases to limit, civil society, as described above (Sajoo 2004). The approach developed in the following section recognises that the normative claims made through religious discourse are an important aspect in the formation of civil society (Alagappa 2004, 32). Within this approach, there is a recognition that fundamental understandings of moral and political order can be found within religious discourse (Schober 2010, 2). Accompanying these understandings of order are ideas regarding individual and collective agency that may be critical to imagining the space of civil society.

For David Herbert, one of the reasons why debates over civil society are so contentious is because there is a clear gap between the ideals of liberal conceptualisations of civil society and how civil society actually manifests in real political contexts. Analytically, this poses a problem because 'normative ideas about what civil society ought to do and be have sometimes obscured and dominated empirical enquiry into what actually existing (empirical) civil society is and does' (2013, 24). This distinction between 'normative' and 'empirical' civil society is useful for the study of civil society not only because it allows for a more nuanced analysis of the empirical formation of civil society, as Herbert suggests, but also because it allows for a closer examination of the potential normative bases for contemporary civil society. Whereas Herbert views the definition of normative civil society as being grounded in liberal ideals, the aim of this section is to identify the various religious resources that may contribute to conceptualisations of civil society in Southeast Asia.

The development of normative resources by religious actors plays an important role in shaping formations of civil society. Rather than identifying whether the liberal ideal of civil society is present or absent across Southeast Asia, my use of the concept of 'normative' civil society in this chapter will emphasise religious conceptualisations and their

contestation when making arguments for civil society, democracy, pluralism, or the protection of religious freedoms. In the following sections, I will briefly discuss various ways in which religion provides forms of public reasoning, offers new possibilities for conceptual developments related to civil society, and contributes to the cultivation of new subjectivities and exclusions related to civil society.

Religion provides important resources for public reasoning, which can be defined generally as the application of religious principles or worldviews to mundane aspects of politics that inform how believers relate to politics or other diverse forms of community (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Bowen 2003). Although it is not possible to suggest that a religion determines absolutely an individual's or community's relation to politics and living together with others, it can play an important role in shaping the public sphere. Cornelio and Medina point out that, in the Philippines, theological reasoning can not only inform Christian arguments related to policy debates but also extend to understandings of the ideal mandate of the authority of the state (doing God's will) (Cornelio and Medina 2019, 155). As such, it can also become one basis from which Christian organisations decide how they will engage with the state on certain issues. In analysing the emergence of 'civil Islam' in Indonesia, Robert Hefner has similarly identified a self-reflexive public reasoning in which 'Muslims will look to their religion for principles of public order ... what they will take from their tradition, however, is not immutably fixed but reflects an ongoing interpretation informed by the changing circumstances of our world' (2000, 10). This 'new public ethic' is premised generally upon an Islamic recognition of pluralism and limited state authority.

As stated earlier, forces shaping religious practice and institutions may inform the role that religion can play in civil society and more broadly in politics at any given time. Political openings in which the space for civil society is expanded may result in transformations in religious discourse as the public sphere widens. In certain cases, especially after the end of long periods of authoritarian rule, conceptualisations of civil society may be emerging simultaneously with other reconceptualisations of politics. One example of these complex conceptual conditions can be found in Myanmar after the 2011 partial opening of politics. Matthew Walton reminds us that it is not only the concept of civil society that develops rapidly at this time, but also broader concepts that are fundamental for political participation. In this case, religious civil society can provide normative resources necessary for 'theorizing or promoting citizen participation in politics ... using Buddhist reasoning and arguments drawn from other traditions' (2016, 128). Although such reasoning and arguments have been openly contested, given the political conditions in Myanmar from 2011 to the 2021 coup, this example demonstrates the breath of the possible conceptual contributions of religious actors in critical moments in the formation of civil society during Myanmar's short-lived political transition.

Contestation over these normative resources, public ethics, or conceptual transformations, however, is to be expected. In fact, in societies in which mostly open discussions about religion can take place, such as in Indonesia and the Philippines, it is likely that religious civil society will reflect deep disagreements regarding religious practice, the role of the state in religion, and public claims to religious pluralism and freedom. Some of this disagreement may be shaped by what Saskia Schäfer has identified as battles over the 'interpretive authority' some groups claim. One example can be found in the claims to authority of the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI, Majelis Ulama Indonesia) and its ability to consolidate its moral authority during Indonesia's early democratic transition in the 2000s. MUI's highly influential fatwas not only demanded the reconfiguration

of the public role of Islam in potentially undemocratic ways, but they also ‘damaged the public standing of established civil society organizations, whose competition had ensured a low degree of centralization of religious interpretative authority for many decades’ (2019, 254).

Schäfer describes MUI’s claims to authority as ‘epistocratic’, or a form of authority that is legitimated by exclusive knowledge. In this case, MUI’s ‘epistocratic privilege’ is grounded solely in its claims to Islamic knowledge and its representation of Islamic scholars. Its ability to make demands on the Indonesian state has been entirely extra-constitutional. To varying degrees, these claims to authority are part of the normative dimensions of religious civil society. In fact, Ahmad Baso (1999) has identified a similar epistocratic dynamic in Islamic thought in Indonesia just prior to the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998. Islamic thinkers in Indonesia in the 1990s crafted a broad array of conceptualisations of Islamic civil society, such as the concept of *masyarakat madani*, M. Dawam Rahardjo’s notion of a ‘*masyarakat utama*’ (a perfect society), or Abdurrahman Wahid’s ‘transformative civil society’. What distinguished these concepts was how resources from a variety of Islamic and philosophical currents were brought together to develop new religious bases for civil society. Baso, however, describes this proliferation of concepts as a form of ‘normative speculation’ that in part reflects competition among Muslim religious elites over the authority to define Islamic civil society (1999, 161). As stated above, emphasising the normative dimensions of religious civil society must also take into account the reaction and contestation that results when normative claims are made.

### **Religious subjectivities and religious civil society**

This emphasis on conceptual transformations is, in fact, an emphasis on how individuals and groups actively rethink themselves in the face of new contingencies, whether political or economic. In this process, they develop new conceptual vocabularies not only to imagine new forms of agency, but also to cultivate new kinds of subjectivity. The creation or expansion of new spaces of civil society requires new forms of subjectivity to inhabit these civil spaces. With religious civil society in mind, this may include new characterisations of moral capacity or new justifications for independent thinking that challenge established means of religious authority.

These subjectivities form through the gradual introduction of new discourses and practices that accompany participation in associational life. Talal Asad has demonstrated this clearly in his treatment of the creation of modern forms of secularism: ‘as the site of the capitalist economy and as the arena of modern sociability, civil society is also the matrix within which diverse institutionalized powers are established and personal identities mobilized’ (1992, 9). For Asad, civil society cannot be reduced to voluntary association independent from the state. Instead, civil society is a field of power that enables the cultivation of new (and old) kinds of subjectivity. Religious associations can cultivate subjectivity through the practices and identities they promote.

New forms of subjectivity can also be found in novel configurations of religion with other secular ideologies, such as nationalism. One example of these new configurations appears in the mobilisation of religion in anti-colonial struggles in Burma (Myanmar) in the first half of the 20th century. The creation of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association in 1906 provided the associational conditions for the formation of a nascent nationalist elite and leadership of the anti-colonial struggle. It also marked the beginning of the process of creating new nationalist subjectivities in part driven by new nationalist print



media and moralistic arguments made through these media. The most basic expression of this new configuration of nationalism and religion is found in the expression, 'to be Burmese is to be Buddhist' (Schober 2010, 66).

This new modern expression of nation and religion had implications for the constitution of gendered subjectivities, as well – what it meant to be a 'Buddhist Burmese woman', for instance. Daw San, whom Chie Ikeya describes as an early 'feminist nationalist', served as the leader of the Burmese Women's Association and the editor of the *Independent Weekly* newspaper in the 1920s and 1930s (2013). Her activism and writings advocated for changes to family relations and the expansion of women's education, as well as making clear the potential of women's contributions to the emerging nationalist movement. Intellectuals such as Daw San were critical to articulating religion with new ideological formations and the organisation of their new subjects, namely the readership of Daw San's newspapers, commentaries, and novel.

In certain cases, religious civil society actively promotes new forms of religious subjectivity. A contemporary example can be found in the advocacy of the Liberal Islam Network (JIL, Jaringan Islam Liberal) in Indonesia. In the 2000s, JIL not only relied upon novel forms of activism, organised primarily online, but it also argued for new forms of religious subjectivity that encouraged individualistic exegesis of Islamic texts (Hooker 2004). Islamic liberalism entails a reorientation of Islamic beliefs that was primarily made possible by reimagining the individual believer's relation to Islamic knowledge. For JIL's founders, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla and Luthfi Assyauckanie, the liberal principle of freedom of conscience becomes manifest in a commitment to hermeneutics that requires new styles of reading and interpretation focused on non-literal, substantial, and contextual readings of Islamic texts (Rachman 2011, 65). Thus, at the heart of the project of liberal Islam for JIL is not merely an attempt to open new spaces of 'civil Islam' at a time of growth of new religious and political freedoms in the wake of the collapse of Suharto regime. Rather, JIL's aim was also to craft new practices and styles of interpretation necessary for imaging new liberal subjects.

Finally, an example of the 'institutionalized powers' Asad discusses can be found in the function of Islamic family law courts in Malaysia, as Peletz discusses in his book, *Islamic Modern*. Peletz provides an analysis of the state incursions into religion described earlier. He argues that 'courts help lay the groundwork for Malaysian-style modernity and civil society' (2002, 21). In addition to providing for a discrete forum to mitigate disagreements, rural family courts 'valorize contractual responsibilities' in their commitment to marriage contracts, provide for certain levels of agency (particularly for women) that might be absent within a household, and 'contribute to the further erosion of extended kinship as well as the democratization of family groups, household relations, and marriage in particular' (21). In this case, state-run religious institutions actively work to form new subjectivities among individuals and families in rural Malay areas, thereby, according to Peletz, providing precise conditions that in part make modern forms of civil society possible.

### **Religious exclusions and religious civil society**

Just as religious conceptualisations of civil society may rely upon or enable certain subjectivities, the state or other civil society actors may enact precise legal or social exclusions that prevent the public recognition of certain religious minorities. These exclusions result in the delimitation of civil society by either prohibiting by law or

preventing by intimidation the public expression of certain religious beliefs (Horstmann 2020). As suggested earlier, as Southeast Asia is a region in which religion is rarely autonomous from the state and in which civil society is subject to various political pressures, the practice and the public expression of religion is often not fully protected, especially for religious minorities.

The extent of exclusion and its effects vary in different states and even across a single state. In the Philippines, both the Catholic Church and mainstream evangelical Christian groups actively reject the Iglesia ni Cristo as a Christian sect. Often the church is referred to as a cult focused on the dynastic leadership of the Manalo family. However, given the constitutional protections of religious freedom in the Philippines, the church has not only been able to maintain its existence for over a century, but it has also successfully carried out a global expansion, substantially developed its humanitarian and philanthropic activities within the Philippines, and has gradually gained substantial political influence as well (Cornelio 2017).

In contrast, sectarian exclusions have affected Shia and Ahmadiyya communities in Indonesia and Malaysia, where both minority Muslim sects have been banned. In Indonesia, conditions for Shia and Ahmadiyya communities have gradually worsened since the end of the Suharto regime. Both communities have been subjected to intimidation and violence targeting public groups, boarding schools, and entire villages (Makin 2017). Most incidents have been instigated by anti-pluralist, Islamist civil society groups, such as the now banned Islamic Defenders Front (FPI, Front Pembela Islam). Anti-Shia sentiment is also prevalent even within Nahdlatul Ulama, an Islamic mass organisation that is typically understood to be committed to pluralist forms of religious civil society (Kayane 2020). Meanwhile in Malaysia, since a National Fatwa Council fatwa in 1996 against Shia teachings, both state and federal governments have increasingly moved to ban Shia activities and have organised mass arrests of Shia adherents (Mohd Faizal and Tan 2017). Ahmadis have also been charged with shariah-related offences in Malaysia, as Islamic religious departments in Malaysia do not recognise them as Muslims.

In Vietnam, by contrast, the state has gradually expanded the number of state-recognised religions, including Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo as well as Chinese-Vietnamese redemptive societies. This transformation has not only enabled the formation of new legal religious associations, but it has also changed the way that individuals can identify publicly (Hoskins and T. Ninh 2017, 4–5; Taylor 2007). In spite of these transformations, religious practice in Vietnam cannot be understood as autonomous from state authority, as Communist party-state-controlled religious organisations remain dominant. As such, changes to the religious public sphere have not been universal. Hmong Protestant communities, for instance, have been subject to substantial repression involving ‘strict censorship and prohibition of evangelical missions on the one hand, along with development, education, and political propaganda programs on the other’ (Ngo 2015, 276). The Vietnamese Communist Party’s efforts to limit Hmong conversions to Protestantism demonstrate the arbitrary limits of religious freedom in Vietnam.

These suspicions of the Vietnamese state towards missionary activity and especially of the work of groups associated with foreign religious organisations, however, result in decisions by such groups sometimes to shield their activities from authorities. The Law on Belief and Religion, which came into effect in 2018, was intended to create a framework that encourages foreign groups to register with the government, thus expanding the Vietnamese state’s authority over such religious NGOs. The definition of religious

civil society becomes complicated when religious organisations intentionally act in explicitly secular ways, either by hiding their religious orientations or by carrying out religious activities surreptitiously, despite their normative valence being limited in doing so. Wells-Dang has suggested that, in many cases, the decision to register or not, or to reveal the religious nature of the organisation, has more to do with practical considerations that shape organisations' ability to react to state pressure, such as the size or home country of the organisation, than with religious beliefs (2007, 412).

Similarly in Myanmar, in the 2000s and immediately after the beginning of the military's political transition in 2011, many religious organisations did not carry out missionary activities and limited religious aspects of their public presence to avoid state scrutiny (Desaine 2018). The religiosity of either Buddhist or Christian organisations was based primarily on their geographical location in Myanmar, their relations to local authorities, and whether the organisations had ties to religious international NGOs. These examples of what can be called 'underground' religious civil society would still to some degree result in trust and a sense of autonomy from the state. However, the fact that they were shielded from the broader public makes it difficult to fully consider these organisations in terms of civil society, while the hidden nature of their religious work obscured the presence of religious civil society.

### **Virtual religious civil society**

One realm in which new religious subjectivities and exclusions have proliferated rapidly is online religious activism and social media (Schäfer 2018). As Merlyna Lim discusses in her chapter in this volume, one of the most remarkable social transformations over the last two decades has been the explosion of Internet connectivity in Southeast Asia and the rapid development of web-based communities and social media. Commenting on the emergence of an array of web-based Buddhist resources and communities in Thailand in the early 2000s, Jim Taylor classified these new forms of religious community as part of a 'virtual civil society' in which 'virtual religious virtuosi have wide social networks, norms, and social trust, and are able to facilitate social and intellectual interactions among their members' (2004, 92). Less than a decade later, Myanmar also experienced the emergence of virtual forms of religious discourse and activism. However, the timing of this change was not related to the growing popularity of social media, but rather to Myanmar's military leadership and its political transition, which saw the expansion of political freedoms and the rapid widening of the space for civil society (Schober 2017, 159).

The loosening of authoritarian rule also had substantial implications for religious discourse in Myanmar. As Schober has suggested, 'Myanmar undertook comprehensive reforms that touch upon every aspect of life in which religious difference has increasingly been marked and social and political identity has been contested' (160). Thus, the resulting expansion of the 'new boundaries of civil discourse' prior to the 2021 coup that Schober describes in part involved dramatic changes to Buddhist religiosity. In a short time, new civil society formations would begin to reflect the intensification of Buddhist nationalism with the rise of the 969 Buy Buddhist movement and the Ma Ba Tha in the wake of violence in 2012 in Rakhine State. Between 2012 and 2014, the Ma Ba Tha successfully employed Facebook to circulate anti-Muslim hate speech and fundraise in support of a wide array of offline activism (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2021, 95–97).

The growth of virtual civil society in Indonesia also facilitated conservative reaction after the emergence of the online-based Liberal Islam Network (JIL) in the early 2000s. JIL became the catalyst for the emergence of conservative online groups that effectively copied JIL's brand of online, intellectual, religious commentary. The most notable example of this was the formation of the Jakarta-based Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilizations (INSISTS) in 2003, just two years after JIL's Islamlib.com website began publishing commentaries (Van Bruinessen 2013, 45). INSISTS is organised generally around Adian Husaini, a former member of the Indonesian Council of Ulama and outspoken critic of liberalism and secularism.

INSISTS's use of JIL's model for online organisation demonstrates that, regardless of deep religious differences, the proliferation of virtual religious civil society has been premised upon virtual organisational structures that are mostly limited in their design and in some cases, remarkably similar. In other words, one critical lesson from virtual civil society is that, whereas contestation among civil society groups may reflect normative differences, associations may display key empirical similarities. In this case, the similarity is based in the presentation of INSISTS and JIL – namely in the structure of their web-presence and content.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on religion and civil society in Southeast Asia, with an emphasis on the normative resources organised religions can provide in the formation of civil society. In doing so, I have developed a concept of religious civil society that reflects the conditions of both civil society and religion in the region. Just as civil society in Southeast Asia has been shaped through the experiences of colonialism, the expansion of modern capitalism, and autocratic rule, these historical forces have transformed religion, too. These transformations have not resulted in a gradual secularisation, as religion has remained a critical part of societies across the region. What is of interest more broadly for the study of religious civil society is that Southeast Asian religion as a domain, more so than many other domains within civil society, is rarely autonomous from the state or governing elites.

The lack of autonomy of religion in the region determines both the nature of religious associational life and the normative resources that inform public religious discourse more generally. This chapter has mapped the contours of religious civil society by examining the dynamics that shape the production and circulation of these resources. Moreover, I have offered an approach to the composition of civil society that includes the subjectivities and exclusions that are important elements of religious discourse and contestation and civil society alike. Although there is no way to generalise the nature of religious civil society in a region with such religious and political diversity as Southeast Asia, an expansive concept of religious civil society can allow for a broader account of the dynamics that foster or constrain religious associational life in the region.

## **Note**

- 1 At the start of his presidency, Duterte launched a violent war on drugs that, by the end of 2021, had resulted in over 300,000 arrests and over 6,000 deaths, according to the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (Kishi and Buenaventura 2021). The number of extra-judicial detentions and killings is likely much higher.

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