# Social Activism in Southeast Asia: An Introduction

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From People Power in the Philippines to the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, Southeast Asia is a region in constant political and social flux. It is home to myriad forms of social activism, from lone cyber-activists and small study groups to semi-professional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and mass movements that advocate change on a plethora of issues from ethnic or religious identity, to labour and gender rights, to gross human rights violations, to the environment. Some activists and organizations operate entirely in their local or national context. Others are deeply embedded in transnational activist networks. But almost all imagine themselves to be engaged in a struggle against the state, which is simultaneously seen as enemy and potential ally in the struggle for social change.

How, then, do the concerns of global social movements play out in the social and cultural contexts of the region and particular Southeast Asian states, and vice versa? To what extent are social movement forms and repertoires of action indigenous and to what extent are they products of 'globalization from below'? What makes social activism 'real'? How collective or sustained does activism have to be before it can be called a social movement? With its history of authoritarian developmentalism and relatively weak civil society, Southeast Asia is an ideal region in which to examine these and other difficult questions that arise in social movement studies about activists' politics, motivations, tactics and strategies, and their claims to authenticity. It is these kinds of questions that the in-depth case studies of different social movements in different Southeast Asian contexts included in this volume seek to address.

Many studies of social activism in the global South use models of social movements developed in the North, although few participate in theory-making, operating instead within the strictures imposed by those models' geographical and historical roots in the United States and Europe. Others eschew these models entirely, choosing instead to locate their empirically rich accounts within an Area Studies framework or to adopt another theoretical approach. This volume takes a different tack, engaging critically with the key analytical concepts of social movement studies in order to interrogate the sometimes taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin them. The cases presented here challenge the widely held belief that social movements cannot exist without a considerable measure of democracy – in doing so, confirming that 'even in very difficult situations, it is possible to observe a social group develop a certain representation of its situation and a certain capacity to act' (Touraine 2002: 90). In addition, they show that similar levels but different *styles* of state repression not only

generate different kinds of opportunities for social activism (Caraway 2006) but also different activist cultures (Boudreau 2004). Finally, they force us to think more carefully about the extent to which local social movements have been influenced by global social movement concerns and international discourse and shaped by funding and repertoires of action; and are able to leverage transnational networks to pursue local causes.

**Studying social activism in Southeast Asia**

In the late 1960s, Europe, the Anglophone world and much of Latin America erupted in waves of protests against war and environmental destruction, and for civil rights, gender equality and the sexual revolution. Attempts to explain this large-scale social unrest saw the emergence of New Social Movement Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory, two of the five approaches that have come to dominate social movement studies. New Social Movement Theory, which emerged in Western Europe in response to the tumult of the late 1960s, is concerned with movements based on identity politics (for example, sexuality) and universalist concerns (such as peace or the environment), which it contrasts with the materialist concerns of the 'old' labour movement (see Habermas 1981; Melucci 1980; Offe 1985; Touraine 1981, 1988). The goals of these 'new' social movements tend to challenge the separation between the public and the private sphere and are likely to reference aspects of everyday life and individuals' need for self-realization (Melucci 1996: 102-104). Not surprisingly, these concerns are pursued primarily within the cultural sphere and in civil society rather than through attempts to seize political power.

Outside Europe, and particularly in Latin America, this emphasis on the multiple non-material identities of individuals, spontaneity and the central role of progressive cultural practice in political transformation proved attractive to activists and intellectuals (Edelman 2001). At the same time, however, it is relatively uncontroversial to observe that the sharpness with which the distinction is drawn between 'old' and 'new' social movements is an ahistorical generalization of the first flush of European post-materialism. As well as ignoring the antecedents of supposedly 'new' movements – for example, the women's and peace movements – New Social Movement theorists have been charged with over-emphasizing new social movements' lack of engagement in the political arena and for their ambiguous claims with regard to those movements' class base.[1] Most importantly, because this body of theory is an extrapolation from a particular historical moment in a particular kind of society, it has limited descriptive power in situations where social movements are in effect a hybrid between 'old' and 'new'.

These flaws are most pronounced when New Social Movement Theory is applied outside the context in which it was developed. In the Southeast Asian context, New Social Movement Theory's emphasis on post-materialist social movements driven by the middle class has been productive, making visible the most vibrant forms of social activism to be found in a region where the labour movement had long been domesticated by the state. But its insistence on an old-new dichotomy is counter-productive. This is a region in which middle-class social movement organizations have not only developed alongside the labour movement, but have engaged with indisputably materialist concerns such as the plight of the urban poor (Phongpaichit 2002; Weiss 2006). Middle-class activists in Indonesia, for example, not only

engage with both materialist and post-materialist issues, but individuals have been known to move, for instance, from an environmental NGO to a labour NGO (Ford 2009). In other examples, social movements that focus on universalist concerns have a working-class base, as is the case with the environmental movement in Thailand (Forsyth 2001).[2]

In roughly the same period that Touraine, Melucci and others were attempting to explain the rise of identity politics in Europe, Resource Mobilization Theory emerged in the United States as a response to the puzzle of why the breakdown of traditional social patterns, shared grievances and relative deprivation – the focus of earlier scholarship on social unrest – did not explain patterns of social upheaval in the late 1960s. However, unlike New Social Movement theorists, with their emphasis on cultural politics, proponents of Resource Mobilization Theory were concerned primarily with the mechanics of social movements and, in particular, with the pivotal role of moral, cultural, human and financial resources in the operation of social movement organizations (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Oberschall 1973; Zald and McCarthy 1987). The key assumption of this model is that modern social movements are highly centralized and consist of formally structured social movement organizations that respond rationally to the opportunities available for collective action. These movements seek to address widespread grievances that exist as a result of conflicts of interest within institutionalized power relations in dialogue with the holders of formal political power. However, Resource Mobilization theorists also emphasise that shared grievance by itself is not enough: the emergence of social movements depends on the availability of the right resources and opportunities (Jenkins 1983: 528). In other words, social movements are seen to be 'an extension of politics by other means, and can be analyzed in terms of conflicts of interest just like other forms of political struggle', and 'in terms of organizational dynamics just like other forms of institutionalized action' (Buechler 1993: 218).

In addition to questioning these assumptions, critics have focused on Resource Mobilization Theory's emphasis on inputs and outputs, its side-lining of grievances, ideology and collective identity, and its emphasis on the rationality of social movement actors.[3] Concepts like access to resources and repertoires of action are useful tools in the analysis of particular social movements in Southeast Asia (e.g. Shigetomi 2009). But Resource Mobilization Theory's assumptions about the degree to which social movements are institutionalized – and the degree to which they have access to politicians – are predicated on a kind of political system that is very different from those found even in the more democratic polities in the region. Importantly, also, Resource Mobilization Theory has little to say about the state beyond its role as interlocutor. Yet more often than not, in the Southeast Asian context the state has been perceived not just as a potential ally, but as the violator of its citizens' civil and political rights, the entity responsible for the destruction of the environment and the obstacle to social change.

In their attempts to address this obvious weakness, scholars in the North American tradition increasingly focused on the question of the state, primarily through an analysis of the 'dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics', which they dubbed 'political opportunity structures' (Tarrow 1998: 19-20; see also McAdam

1982; McAdam et al. 1996; Tarrow 1989). This iteration in the scholarship, which has come most commonly to be known as Political Process Theory, seeks to explain cycles of protest and their outcomes through an examination of the relative openness of the institutionalized political system; the stability of a broad set of elite alignment; the presence of elite allies; and the state's capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam et al. 1996). It is an approach that has a greater emphasis on movement success and failure than on movement structure and process, and is more sensitive to the relationship between social movement organizations and their socio-political and institutional environments than traditional Resource Mobilization Theory (Caniglia and Carmin 2005). However, like both New Social Movement Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory, the analytical tools of Political Process Theory have been shaped by their genesis in the experience of the industrialized, liberal democratic North.

Although it has evolved through its application in Latin America – and has been fruitfully applied in the Southeast Asian context – the liberal democratic experience remains the normative focus of Political Process Theory. This has led to a tendency to characterize people living under authoritarian regimes as compliant – a tendency that belies the fact that political opposition and collective action can exist even where no social movement organization directly challenges the regime, as is the case in Vietnam (Wells-Dang 2010). In addition, analyses of the relationship between regime repressiveness and the likelihood of contention within this tradition tend to emphasize the difference between non-democratic regimes and the liberal democracies of the West rather than seeking to explain the differences between particular non- or semi-democratic contexts. Yet, as Caraway (2006: 280) has argued in her work on the labour movements of India, Indonesia and Burma, significant differences exist within regime categories, and thus political openness 'is not synonymous with regime type'. Where Political Process Theory does seek to explain differences within regime categories, it tends to see individual countries as hermetically sealed political systems. Consequently, as Schock (1999) notes in his comparative analysis of social movements in the Philippines and Burma in the 1980s, it accounts for the role of influential allies and elite divisions but fails to adequately consider movements' international links.

The fourth approach of note is the US-based social constructivist approach to social movements (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1992; Johnston 2009; Snow and Benford 1988). Like New Social Movement Theory, this body of scholarship is concerned with the idea of collective identity as a process and with what Benford and Snow (1988) call 'meaning work'. According to scholars working with this approach, social movement actors do not simply convey meaning, as those working within other schools of social movement studies tend to assume. Rather, social movement organizations' fundamental task is the production and maintenance of that meaning. This task is undertaken through a process of 'framing', where:

> Collective action frames are constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect [*sic*] change.

(Benford and Snow 2000: 615)

The concept of framing has been extremely influential in the study of social movements. It has particular resonance in the study of social activism in the authoritarian and semi-democratic contexts of Southeast Asia because it provides a powerful tool for explaining why social movement organizations choose particular points of reference over others when describing their concerns. Sometimes framing has been used by activists to deflect unwanted government attention, as was the case with the labour movement in New Order Indonesia (Ford 2009) – and still is with the feminist movement in Singapore (Lyons this volume). Conversely framing can be used to gain access to external resources, as Li (2000) and others have shown is the case with small farmers in Borneo, who have successfully framed their local interests in such a way as to appeal to the concerns of both the indigenous rights movement and the environmental movement at the regional and global levels (see also Barney 2004; Potter 2009).[4] Framing has also proven to be extremely useful in the analysis of power relations and processes of diffusion within transnational activist networks, which play a key role in supporting – and shaping – the social movements of the South (e.g. Smith 2002).

In recent decades, the effects of globalization on social movements have become a major focus for social movement scholars for two reasons. On the one hand, the phenomenon of 'globalization from above', exemplified by the density of global financial networks and global production chains, has led to the emergence of local and transnational campaigns concerned with its economic, social and political impact. This topic is the subject of a prolific body of Northern scholarship, but has received little scholarly attention in Southeast Asia (but see Caouette 2006; Glassman 2001; Smeltzer 2009; also Caouette and Tadem, this volume). On the other hand, the rubric of 'globalization from below' has created space for the analysis of transnational networks and coalitions through which social movement actors coordinate and support one another to effect change (Portes 2000).

The transnational advocacy network (TAN) has emerged as perhaps the most influential concept in explanations of globalization from below. Defined as networks that include 'relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services' (Keck and Sikkink 1998:2), TANs are said to engage in information, symbolic, leverage and accountability politics to set agendas and to influence state discourse, policy and behaviour. Precisely because they operate at and across different scales, these transnational networks can draw international attention to rights-violating behaviour and empower local activists. Glassman (2001), for example, points to the process of 'scale-jumping', which Thai activists used to garner local and international support in their struggle to get justice for villagers displaced by the construction of two dams in Ubon Ratchathani province. With reference to neighbouring Malaysia, Chin (2003: 66) argues that NGOs have benefited from regional and international alliances, which have provided a means with which to apply pressure to government through channels such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations. Indeed, Malaysian NGO activists are only too aware of the protection networks can afford them in their own national context, as demonstrated by the case of Irene Fernandez, the director of the women's labour NGO, Tenaganita. Because of international support, Irene has been able to continue her NGO work despite decades of being subjected to government pressure and lawsuits, and even imprisonment (Ford 2007).

Three aspects of the research on transnational activism are pertinent to Southeast Asia. First, by looking across borders, rather than simply within them, this body of work creates space in which to consider the impact of particular political regimes on activists' enthusiasm for engaging transnationally and the efficacy of campaigns undertaken by transnational advocacy networks. Second, it has a strong focus on relationships between Southern social movement organizations and their Northern counterparts. Third, an important element in the operation of TANs in the Southeast Asian region is the extent to which they draw on the human rights frame as a way of challenging state practice. Adding a transnational dimension to what have long been primarily nationally focused analyses also helps overcome the problem of methodological nationalism – which is rife in Southeast Asian Studies, but also in much of Social Movement Studies.[5] It also recognizes the intensely transnational character of even apparently local struggles in the cyber age.

This is not to suggest, however, that this approach is without its limitations. As Caraway (2006: 278) has noted, scholars interested in transnational activist networks have tended to 'either focus on how domestic factors affect the *success* of particular transnational efforts or on how transnational modes of political action alter outcomes at the national level', with 'startlingly little systematic consideration' of the impact of the domestic political environment on transnational activism. In addition, much of the scholarship is underpinned by an implicit assumption that transnationalism is necessarily beneficial for local movements, and thus opportunities to 'scale up' should automatically be pursued – something that Lyons (2009), for example, has argued is not always the case. Finally, scholars have tended to have little regard for the complexities associated with diffusion within and around transnational networks. Most take it for granted that resources and ideas move centrifugally from the 'core' to the 'periphery', paying little attention to the processes through which these transfers occur, and failing to recognise that social movement actors in the South are anything more than passive recipients (Chabot and Duyvendak 2002). At the same time, more celebratory accounts gloss over the extent to which NGOs and even mass social movement organizations rely on financial resources provided by their Northern 'partners' (Ford 2006; Frank et al. 2007). Indeed, very few accounts that engage with the social movement literature refer to this reality at all, and thus fail to recognize the impact that it has on social movement agendas and modes of activism (but see Coronado 2008; Ford and Dibley 2010; also Dibley this volume).[6]

As this discussion suggests, each of these models has something to offer the study of social activism in Southeast Asia. Some – Political Process Theory, framing theory and the transnational approach – are better suited than others to explaining the relationship between social movements and the state or between local and global social movements. But it is the smorgasbord of analytical concepts that they collectively provide – rather than any one model – that is truly useful when it comes to understanding particular movements and particular forms of activism in the region, and then only when combined with a detailed analysis of the national and local contexts in which activism takes place.

**Struggling against the state**

As a site for the study of social activism, Southeast Asia offers both great variety and significant coherence. Encompassing some of the largest and the smallest countries in the

world, this ethnographically varied and culturally complex region accounts for just 3 per cent of the earth's land mass but around 8.5 per cent of its population (Map 1.1). Politically, it consists of eleven states with a great diversity of regime type, from the tiny absolute monarchy of Brunei and repressive Myanmar; to socialist Vietnam and Laos and semi-authoritarian Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore; to the sometimes-democratic Thailand, the messy democracy of the Philippines and the recently democratized polity of Indonesia; to the fledgling state of Timor-Leste, which only came into existence in the new millennium. Economically, six of these countries are middle-income countries, four of which fall into the lower middle-income category. Singapore and oil-rich Brunei are high-income countries, while Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos are located in the low-income band. Cambodia and the middle-income countries – including the socialist-oriented market economy of Vietnam – are deeply embedded into global production networks: in addition to being suppliers of natural resource-based products, with China they account for a significant proportion of the world's supply of electronics, textiles, clothing and footwear.



**Map 1.1 Southeast Asia**

In geopolitical terms, the countries of Southeast Asia are bound by their shared experience of colonialism – the French in Indochina, the British in Myanmar, Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia, the Dutch in Indonesia, the Portuguese in Timor-Leste (as well as in parts of Malaysia and Indonesia during the first wave of European colonialism), and first the Spanish and then the Americans in the Philippines. Thailand may have avoided colonization, but it

nevertheless felt the presence of the colonial rulers, particularly the British, in neighbouring territories (Thongchai 1997). Southeast Asia then became the key battleground in the Pacific theatre during World War II, following the displacement of the colonial powers by the Japanese. Over the next 20 years all but Brunei and Timor-Leste achieved independence, only to become caught up in the superpowers' struggle for global influence during the Cold War. As the US and its allies fought to contain Communism, the new Southeast Asian nations were effectively forced into two camps: the pro-Western ASEAN and 'the rest'. Despite the growing weight attributed to human rights norms by the international community during this period, developmentalist authoritarian regimes were not only tolerated, but actively supported by the non-communist bloc.

The second half of the twentieth century saw the demise of the Left and of mass movements more generally in much of Southeast Asia, as the space available for social activism shrank.[7] Indonesia is a case in point. In the 1920s, urban Java and pockets of Sumatra experienced what Shiraishi (1990) famously dubbed 'an age in motion', in which social movements flourished in an atmosphere of continual intellectual ferment fuelled by local elites' experiences of Dutch education and contact with Dutch socialists in the colony, and in some cases by opportunities to live and study in the Netherlands. Trade unions alone had a membership of around 100,000 in the 1920s and 1930s – some five times the total membership of political parties (Ingleson 2000: 471-7). Like other social movements, the labour movement was closely tied to the nationalist movement, maintaining prominence in the revolutionary war against the Dutch (1945-49) and in the first decades after Independence. But the Left was crushed in the anti-communist purges that took place after General Suharto seized power in 1965 with support from the religious right and parts of the student movement. Building on corporatist structures established during Guided Democracy (1957-65), Suharto's New Order mandated that interest representation take place through a system of 'functional groups' designed to eliminate opportunities for open resistance.[8] Repression increased from the 1970s and into the 1980s in Indonesia, but also in Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore, Mahathir's Malaysia, and in the Philippines under Marcos. Meanwhile, in mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand had returned to military rule, the Khmer Rouge was in Cambodia, and Vietnam was recovering from the American War.

In the mid-1980s, however, a tipping point was reached with the emergence of People Power in the Philippines (see Boudreau this volume). Around the same time, the increasing integration of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand into global production systems exposed the regimes in those countries to greater international scrutiny. This was also the period in which Northern governments began to increasingly funnel international development assistance to NGOs rather than to governments (Edwards and Hulme 1996). NGOs had been engaged in development work in the region for some decades, but the 1980s and 1990s saw an explosion in numbers: by the late 1990s, they were ubiquitous even in socialist Vietnam (Vasavakul 2003). These decades also marked a significant shift in the focus of NGOs, which began to harness the international language of human rights in their efforts to lobby governments in the region to promote social change and, increasingly, in their criticisms of governments' lack of willingness or capacity to do so (van Tuijl 1999).[9] NGOs could play this role for a number of reasons. First and foremost, they were able to avoid the constraints placed on mass

organizations in most countries in the region by governments fearful of mass movements' revolutionary potential. Also important were their international partners, which not only provided them with funds and other resources but also had the capacity to lobby governments in the North to exert pressure through diplomatic and trade relations should they be threatened with closure or their members intimidated or harmed. These transnational mechanisms became increasingly effective after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, as Northern states began to pursue human rights abuses more seriously once they no longer felt the need to provide unconditional support to the region's authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes.

Not surprisingly, a key feature of post-Cold War activism in the region has been the continued focus on the state as a campaign target, but also as an arena for the promotion of social change. The literature on social activism in Southeast Asia reflects this emphasis on the relationship between the state and civil society, and in particular on civil society's role as a promoter of democracy (e.g. Aspinall 2005; Chong 2005; Jemadu 2004; Lee Hock Guan 2004; Ng et al. 2006; Reid 2008).[10] Definitions of civil society vary widely, although all distinguish it from the state and the market.[11] Some include the private sphere of the family (e.g. Cohen and Arato 1999), but civil society is more commonly defined as an 'ideal-typical category … that both describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organizing, self-reflexive and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions' (Keane 1998: 6). A key aspect of this approach is the distinction it draws between civil and political society, where *civil society* is 'a realm rather than … a specific set of actors', which is 'populated by 'groups and individuals who, regardless of their perspectives or organizational bases, debate, evaluate, and challenge or support official discourses, interpretations, structures, or policies', and *political society* (cf. Stepan 1988) is the arena in which political contestation over 'public power and the state apparatus' takes place (Weiss 2006: 9; also see Aspinall this volume).

Just as contemporary social movement theory is rooted in the experiences of the late 1960s, the idea of 'civil society' experienced a renaissance in post-Communist Europe, when its development came to be seen as a fundamental requirement for societies 'seeking to recover from the excesses of state socialism' (Kumar 1993: 375). It was subsequently embraced by scholars – and by government and non-governmental donors seeking to promote democracy in the developing world. In the hands of the latter, 'civil society' effectively became just another name for the NGOs commissioned to implement their programmes. This effective equation of NGOs and civil society, which subsequently made its way into parts of the academic literature, has prompted Southeast Asia scholars like Thayer (2009) to condemn the civil society paradigm for its exclusive preoccupation with NGOs and community-based organizations as agents of political change. More fundamentally, as Rodan (1996: 4) points out, 'the analytical and normative insistence on a state–civil society separation diverts attention from the critically important point that civil societies cannot exist as alternatives to states – only in relation to them'. As Rodan goes on to argue, assumptions of a clear boundary between state and civil society is even more problematic in Southeast Asia than

they are in Europe or North America because of the extent to which social forces have become incorporated into the state.

Many scholars of Southeast Asian social movements adopt the civil society framework while at the same time pointing to its weaknesses, particularly in relation to civil society's role as an agent of democratization. Aspinall (2004: 90), for example, argues that the presence of civil society institutions is insufficient in and of itself to guarantee a shift to a more democratic society, as 'only a civil society that is truly *civil* supports democracy (emphasis in the original)'.[12] There is also a strong body of work critiquing the assumption that an active civil society necessarily supports processes of democratization at all. For example, Kitirianglarp and Hewison (2009), writing on Thailand, argue that social movements are driven by shifting alliances, which encourage movement leaders to compromise their goals and may even lead to situations in which leaders support non-democratic initiatives.[13] The heavy reliance on theories of civil society in the literature on Southeast Asian social movements nevertheless continues, placing it in stark contradistinction to the North American schools of social movement studies, which do not engage with the civil society paradigm – and in an even starker contrast with New Social Movement Theory, which engages with the concept of civil society but has no interest in democratization or the other concerns of big-P politics.

## Outline of the book

The question of the relationship between civil society and the state in Southeast Asia is addressed in the second chapter of this volume by Garry Rodan, who fleshes out the model he developed with Kanishka Jayasuriya for thinking about different modes of civil society–state engagement in the region (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007). Using examples from a number of countries in the region, Rodan argues that semi-democratic and even authoritarian Southeast Asian states have recognized the necessity of accommodating new social forces, but have done so primarily through sites of 'administrative' and 'societal' incorporation designed to discourage the development of independent collective and representative organizations. The key question raised by his analysis is whether – and under what conditions – civil society participation in sites of administrative and societal incorporation constitute social activism, and how these modes of participation are constrained by, but also help to shape, political space.

Relationships between political and social movements, and the effects of political incorporation on the latter, are themes taken up by Edward Aspinall and Vince Boudreau. In Chapter Three, Aspinall pushes the boundaries of conventional understandings of what constitutes a social movement in his analysis of the Free Aceh Movement, which he argues was transformed from a social to a political movement by its incorporation in Indonesia's electoral system after decades of separatist struggle against the state. While noting the fundamental differences between social and political movements, Aspinall emphasizes the porousness and fluidity of the boundary between these categories, citing the classic examples of the electoral wings of the labour and environmental movements at different times in established democratic systems, but also examples of Islamists and NGO activists who have made the transition to 'political society' in democratizing Southeast Asia. Arguing that armed

rebellion represents 'the most visceral form of social protest imaginable', Aspinall asserts that, despite the Free Aceh Movement's statist pretensions, until the Helsinki Peace Agreement, Acehnese separatism constituted a social movement that can be analysed in terms of its framing mechanisms, political opportunity structure and capacity for resource mobilization.

In Chapter Four, Boudreau argues that 'people power' in the Philippines constituted a short-term coalescence of interest between social movements concerned with sectoral issues (for example, labour and agriculture) rather than a fundamental reframing of those movements' alliances and purposes. Within a few years of Marcos being deposed, social movement organizations had given up on the 'new politics' of systemic reform, and turned their attention to finding ways to promote their own particular sectoral reform agendas. Their two primary strategies for doing so brought them into contact with electoral politics in two ways: through alliances of convenience with mainstream politicians and through contests for the 50 lower house seats reserved under the 'party list' system which, Boudreau argues, gives activists a much greater chance of entering parliament but limits their capacity to reform mainstream politics. This, he says, constitutes a very different form of institutionalization from that dominant in the North: rather than being transformed into an interest group, Filipino social movements have maintained their grassroots base and capacity for protest while at the same time being domesticated through their links with mainstream political parties and their quest for direct political influence.

The chapters by Rodan, Aspinall and Boudreau raise important questions about the form and function of social movement organizations. How do social movement organizations change over time, and in what circumstances? What effect does this have on their values, and on their repertoires of action? What strategies do social movements use to navigate restrictive political conditions? In Chapter Five, Nicola Edwards addresses the first two of these questions in her examination of commercialization on the organics movement and its impact on movement values. Drawing on three case studies from Indonesia, Edwards makes a complex argument for considering intention and scale when assessing the significance of increasing commercial activity for social movement organizations. In addition, she asserts, activists' engagement with the market must be understood in terms of the values of the local organics movement, which include a concern for livelihoods – an issue that is of little interest to their Northern counterparts. This point is particularly revealing since, as Edwards explains, movement organizations from across the ideological spectrum have strong international links, and are in many ways influenced by the frames used by their international counterparts.

In Chapter Six, Dennis Arnold takes another look at the question of movement objectives and their impact on modes of activism, this time in the context of the multi-layered relationship between the democracy movement and campaigns for the rights of Burmese migrants working in the Thai border town of Mae Sot. In his chapter, Arnold contrasts the 'democracy from above' approach adopted by the Federation of Trade Unions Burma (FTUB) – an organization closely linked to the national Council of the Union of Burma – and the 'activism from below' promoted by the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association (YCO). Echoing Boudreau's observations on the importance of distinguishing movements for democracy and

their sectorally based constituents, Arnold argues that the relative weight accorded to the aims of democratization and improving conditions for migrant workers have fundamentally shaped each organization's approach, with FTUB favouring a service approach designed to ameliorate the suffering of Burmese migrant workers until such time that regime change is achieved in Myanmar and YCO seeking to empower those migrant workers by supporting their factory-based campaigns for better wages and working conditions.

Arnold's account of the Burmese labour movement in exile draws attention to two other key points. First, it emphasizes the importance of scale for the viability of social movements faced by hostile regimes. The Myanmar case – where trade unions have been forced to operate almost completely *outside* the nation-state – is an extreme example of how different scales can be used to facilitate social activism that would not otherwise be possible, but the FTUB's reliance on international financial, logistical and moral support for its work is commonplace in the region. Second, Arnold's account shows what can happen when labour activists are forced to think beyond the standard organizational forms and strategies adopted by the labour movement. In Chapter Seven, Andrew Brown and Sakdina Chatrakul Na Ayudhya flesh out this second point in their analysis of the process through which 'civil society-based labour organizing' came to be the dominant form of labour organizing in Thailand, despite a long history of trade unionism and state recognition of the right of trade unions to represent workers' interests at the industry level and in the national political sphere.[14] Arguing that these developments are symptomatic of a broader trajectory in which labour movements are continually 'made and remade' in response to structural changes in their national context, Brown and Sakdina point to the Thai labour movement's flirtation with the Yellow Shirt and Red Shirt movements as evidence for this claim.

Dominique Caouette and Teresa Tadem take up the question of the relationship between transnational activist networks, local social movement organizations and local politics in Chapter Eight. Their close examination of five Philippines-based anti-globalization networks – three local, two transnational – seeks to challenge overly simplistic descriptions of a broad cosmopolitan anti-globalization movement that operates 'above' national contexts. They conclude that, while dealing with inherently global issues, local networks remain very much driven by local politics and very much focused on the Philippine state as an arena of contention. Similarly, the regional networks are strongly influenced by the life experiences and political persuasion of their Filipino staff. This insight is valuable empirically, given the dominance of Filipino activists in regional social movement organizations concerned with other causes. It is interesting theoretically because it forces us to consider more deeply the impact of individuals, with all their local baggage, on the goals and strategies of supposedly supra-national networks and organizations.

An equally important aspect of transnational activist networks pertains to the effects of the structurally determined power relationships embedded in them. Many scholarly accounts – and many Northern activists – cling to the assumption that such networks are based on relationships of equality. At the same time, it is common knowledge that many Southern social movement organizations are heavily reliant on material support from abroad. Indeed, debates about whether Southern NGOs can be considered social movement organizations

often hinge on assessments of their financial dependence on their Northern 'partners', which force them into relationships of upward accountability (Ford 2006). Thushara Dibley takes up key elements of this debate in Chapter Nine. Having noted the paucity of literature on movements for peace in Southeast Asia – a region where peace activism tends to be absorbed into other kinds of movements, including movements for democracy and separatist movements – Dibley turns her attention to the nexus between internationally supported peacebuilding initiatives and the development of a peace movement in post-conflict Timor-Leste. On the basis of this examination, she concludes that, while international organizations' peacebuilding programmes helped form a shared identity around peace and a commitment to change among local activists, they also dictated the limits of local activists' engagement by channelling their energy into containment of the potential for renewed conflict and away from contentious action.

As Dibley's analysis intimates, international agendas are not always progressive – a fact nowhere clearer than in global responses to human trafficking since the US passed its Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000 (Ford et al. 2012). Larissa Sandy takes up this theme in Chapter Ten, where she describes Cambodian sex workers' struggle to maintain recognition of sex work as work (itself a construct of a global movement) in the face of sustained pressure on the Cambodian government to criminalize sex work, and on NGOs to shift their focus from empowerment of sex workers as workers to their rescue as victims of trafficking. Sandy's account of the 'No Exit' campaign – mounted in response to an MTV EXIT (End Exploitation and Trafficking) event in 2008 – exposes the multi-scalar character of the clash between the international sex worker rights movement and the anti-trafficking juggernaut. Building on transnational alliances established during an earlier campaign against trials among sex workers of the anti-retroviral drug Tenofovir as an HIV preventative, Cambodian sex worker activists demanded that the anti-trafficking law be repealed and persecution cease. Although not entirely successful, the international campaign that followed led to a strong reprimand of the Cambodian government by the US Department of State for its conflation of sex work and sex trafficking.

In the Cambodian case, the government leveraged international norms for its own purposes. However, elsewhere – and more commonly – international norms provide a resource for social activists seeking to challenge government policy and practice. Julian Lee's chapter on Seksualiti Merdeka, an annual sexuality rights festival in Malaysia, illustrates some of the ways in which social activists draw on international norms in their attempts to establish an alternative source of authority. Malaysia is a semi-democratic state in which Islam occupies a powerful position as the constitutionally recognized state religion and the compulsory faith of the Malay population. The values that sexuality rights activists champion are in direct conflict with the orthodox tenets of Islam, but also with the rhetoric of 'Asian Values' promoted by Mahathir Mohamad, who served as Malaysia's Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003. Although Mahathir has long since retired, Malaysian authorities continue to promote a combination of Islamic and 'Asian' values that positions homosexuality as a threat to the very foundations of Malaysian society. It is in this context, Lee argues, that sexuality rights activists resort to a combination of non-traditional modes of activism – particularly alliance-building with established local bodies with human rights interests (such as the Malaysian Bar Council) and

appeals to international human rights norms – in their attempt to carve out a space for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Malaysians.

The book ends with a chapter by Lenore Lyons, who returns to the theme of social activism and the state in her exploration of the Christian Right's attempt to take control of Singapore's premier feminist organization, AWARE. In chronicling the fierce and very public struggle that ensued between the usurpers and AWARE's self-styled 'old guard', Lyons reflects on many of the themes addressed elsewhere in this volume, among them state attempts to domesticate social activism while at the same time seeking to be seen as being tolerant of civil society; Asian Values and state concerns about the influence of Western discourse on Southeast Asian social movements; and conflict within social movements and social movement organizations. In particular, she illuminates two key features of social activism in the region. First, her discussion of the ways in which the frames adopted by both camps sought to appeal to government rhetoric reminds us of the extent to which activist repertoires are determined by the political space available – in this case, leading to a victory for the old guard, whose claims of inclusiveness ultimately won out against the Christian Right's appeals to family values. Second, she throws out a challenge to conventional understandings of Singapore as a polity characterized by an *absence* of social activism of any consequence by pointing out the extent to which Singaporeans mobilized in support of both sides of this debate.

As these accounts demonstrate, the terrain of social activism in Southeast Asia is both varied and complex, dictated neither by regime type nor by level of integration in transnational activist networks, though clearly influenced by both. Many of the goals that drive social movement organizations (and the strategies used to achieve them) are global: some, responses to the economic and social impact of globalization; others, products of diffusion from Northern 'partners', be they the overseas development agencies of Northern governments, Northern NGOs or transnational activist networks. Given the region's colonial history and the level of integration in the global community of all but the most isolated countries, it is unreasonable to expect otherwise. However, as the Southeast Asian experience confirms, it is not possible to simply to take a Northern template – be it New Social Movement Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory, Political Process Theory, framing or the transnational approach – and apply them uncritically: in other words, to take a model in search of a case. It is only when broken down into its constituent parts and complemented by the kind of detailed local knowledge that underpins the contributions to this collection that the conceptual toolbox of social movement studies becomes truly useful in Southeast Asia or, indeed, elsewhere in the global South.

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**Notes**

[1] For a detailed overview of both sides of the debate on these questions, see Buechler (1995).

[2] Malaysian scholar, Shamsul (2001: 198), even goes as far as redefining the terminology, arguing that the term 'old' social movement is best used to describe those movements 'established and legitimized by institutional structures of the state with the primary aim of supporting well-organized state-sponsored activities' whereas NGOs exemplify a 'new' form of social movement, which 'emerged to articulate differences, plurality and dissent' in the Southeast Asian context.

[3] Buechler (1993) provides an overview and analysis of these and other criticisms of Resource Mobilization Theory in the context of the US women's movement.

[4] The adoption of international discursive frames is not always beneficial. For example, Blackwood (2008) has shown that global activist discourse about gay and lesbian identity – discourse promoted by activists in Jakarta – has little resonance with the subjectivity of of *tomboi* and their girlfriends in West Sumatra.

[5] As prominent scholars within the field of research recognize, until quite recently, 'most research on social movements [was] grounded in the assumption that social movements operate within state boundaries' (McCarthy 1997: 243).

[6] This is not to suggest that the question of funding has been totally ignored. For example, McCarthy (1997: 253-254) notes that, in the absence of a mass constituency, transnational social movement organizations are more reliant on stable sources of funding than local social movement organizations, and that it is important to ask where those resources come from. Moreover, a significant body of work does exist on aid projects that seek to 'develop' civil society. For a discussion of this literature, see Ford and Dibley (2011).

[7] For a discussion of the Left in other parts of the ASEAN-5 from the beginning of the twentieth century, see Hewison and Rodan (1996).

[8] Corporatist structures were also introduced in Singapore and Vietnam in this period.

[9] Southeast Asia is certainly not the only region in which human rights NGOs constitute a key oppositional force. For example, see Sampson (2003) for a discussion on the NGOs' role in the Balkans.

[10] For a discussion of social movement responses to democratization in Latin America, see Roberts (1997) and Hipsher (1998).

[11] For a critique of this position, see Rodan (1996, this volume); also Edwards (this volume).

[12] There is now a significant body of work on 'uncivil society', which shares the assumption that civil society is at once a 'social value and a set of social institutions' (Hall 1995: 2). This theme is particularly strong in debates around Islamic organizations' contribution to civil society in the region, especially in Indonesia (e.g. Hefner 2000) and Malaysia. Lee (2010), for example, argues that increasing religiosity, and in particular political Islam, weakens civil society whereas Ng et al (2006: 84-105) conclude that Islam does not necessarily curb civil society or political space in Malaysia – but both make implicit judgements about the *civility* of Islam in reaching their disparate conclusions. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, many scholars describe religion as a force that can empower domestic civil society and activism. Kyaw (2008) argues that Burmese monks were able to instigate protests and mobilize the people in the 2007 uprising as a result of their traditional role in society. Similarly, Roces (2005) argues that Filipino nuns occupied a unique place in society that allowed them to engage in pro-democracy activism during the Marcos period in a way that was not possible for other women. However, here, too, opinions differ. In his analysis of the Philippines feminist movement's contribution to the global anti-trafficking movement, Tigno (2012) points to the hegemonic influence of conservative Catholic discourse on local interpretations of sex work and, consequently, of human trafficking.

[13] For a critique of the democratization literature's 'excessive focus on class actors and economic factors', see Slater (2009).

[14] Non-union forms of labour movement organization are a common feature across the region. For an overview, see Ford (2009: 5-9).