Civil Society in Search of an Alternative Regionalism in ASEAN

Alexander C. Chandra

2009

iisd International Institute for Sustainable Development · Institut international du développement durable

Civil Society in Search of an Alternative Regionalism in ASEAN[1]

Alexander C. Chandra[2]

---

1   This article had previously published in the Hosei Kenkyu Journal of Law and Politics, Vol. 75, No. 4, March 2009, pp. 47-69.

2   Dr. Alexander C. Chandra is the Southeast Asian Coordinator for the Trade Knowledge Network (TKN), a global collaboration of research institutions that aims to assess and address the impacts of trade and investment policies on sustainable development. The TKN is coordinated by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), a Canada-based not-for-profit organisation promoting change towards sustainable development. The views and opinions expressed in this article are entirely those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the positions of TKN, its members and/or IISD.

About the Trade Knowledge Network
http://www.tradeknowledgenetwork.net

The Trade Knowledge Network is a global collaboration of research institutions across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas working on issues of trade and sustainable development. Coordinated by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the TKN links network members, strengthens capacity and generates new research to assess and address the impact of trade and investment policies on sustainable development.

The overarching aim of the TKN is to help ensure that trade and investment contribute to sustainable development, with social development and the environment equitably addressed in trade and investment policies. The TKN furthers this aim by generating compelling research with clear policy recommendations and communicating those effectively to decision-makers nationally, regionally and globally.

The TKN is hosted by the International Institute for Sustainable Development, a Canada-based not-for-profit organization promoting change towards sustainable development. As a policy research institute dedicated to the effective communication of its findings, the Institute engages decision-makers in government, business, NGOs and other sectors in the development and implementation of policies that are simultaneously beneficial to the global economy, the global environment and to social well-being.

About the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)
http://www.iisd.org

The International Institute for Sustainable Development contributes to sustainable development by advancing policy recommendations on international trade and investment, economic policy, climate change, measurement and assessment and natural resources management. Through the Internet, we report on international negotiations and share knowledge gained through collaborative projects with global partners, resulting in more rigorous research, capacity building in developing countries and better dialogue between North and South.

IISD's vision is better living for all—sustainably; its mission is to champion innovation, enabling societies to live sustainably. IISD is registered as a charitable organization in Canada and has 501(c)(3) status in the United States. IISD receives core operating support from the Government of Canada, provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Environment Canada; and from the Province of Manitoba. The Institute receives project funding from numerous governments inside and outside Canada, United Nations agencies, foundations and the private sector.

Contents

Introduction

The so-called *alternative regionalism* is becoming a popular concept of late particularly given the increasing role and importance of non-governmental element, or civil society, also commonly referred to as the *track-three*, in the institutional development and community building of Southeast Asia. Despite the widespread use of the terms, there is yet a common understanding amongst relevant actors in the regionalisation process as to what alternative regionalism actually entails of. For most of *mainstream regionalists*, on the one hand, alternative regionalism today is associated with the move from the old, or first wave of, regionalism to the new, or second wave, of regionalism, where regionalism now takes place in a multipolar world order, emerges as a spontaneous process, open and outward in character and involves a multidimensional processes.[3] On the other hand, the so-called *progressive regionalists*, including those of leftist-oriented activists and scholars, argue that the idea of alternative regionalism is well-rooted in the Latin American model of regionalism, which emerges as a response to the domination of Western imperialism.[4]

The term even causes more confusion in Southeast Asia. Leftist-oriented activists, looking up to the Latin American regionalism model, envision a regional integration project in Southeast Asia capable to response to the hostile Western dominated forces of globalisation process. For these activists, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is the main integration initiative in the region to date, has pursued regional integration project without a clear vision (Chavez 2005). In contrast, mainstream economists and political scientists in the region are influenced by the success of some Western-led model of regional integration projects (e.g., the European union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)), and are longing to adopt similar initiatives in the region. Fortunately, regionalism and the associated regionalisation process in ASEAN are not as black and white as perceived by these two ideological camps. To date, ASEAN has adopted a range of models of integration projects to suit the interest of the member countries. It has somewhat able to increase its stature in international diplomacy so as to enable the Association to cope with global challenges as many progressive regionalists envision the grouping to be, but, at the same time, it has also facilitate greater dominance of non-ASEAN entities in the economic and socio-cultural aspects of its cooperation.

Having said this, it is also extremely insufficient to place ASEAN in the category of alternative. The prevalent indifferent attitude of the people in Southeast Asia towards the Association and the increase push by civil society groups to make this regional grouping more relevant to its people are evident enough to indicate that ASEAN is far from being a perfect regional institution. As ASEAN moves towards achieving the so-called ASEAN Community by 2015, policy-makers and civil society alike talk about the importance of people and their interests in the Association's regional projects and activities. ASEAN policy-makers, for example, have advanced the idea of a *people-oriented* ASEAN as a way to buy the support of wider constituencies in endorsing the grouping's initiatives. On the other hand, civil society remains suspicious of this idea and has launched and pushed instead for the *people-centred* ASEAN concept, which put the *people* at the centre of the regionalisation process of the Association.

The theoretical and practical debates on and about alternative regionalism in Southeast Asian context has been minimal and far from sufficient. Given the increase dynamics of civil society's efforts to reform ASEAN, alternative regionalism, or the concept attached to it, will hold an important position in the analysis of civil society dynamics in Southeast Asian regionalism. This paper is one of the few attempts

---

3   See, for example, Hettne *et al*. (1999) and Hettne and Söderbaum (2000).

4   For further analysis of the emerging alternative regional governance in the Americas see, *inter alia*, Fawcett and Serrano (2005).

that have been initiated by scholars and activists from within the region that tries to fill this gap. More importantly, it is also an effort to provide greater clarity of the dynamics attached to civil society's engagement with ASEAN as a whole. The second section of this paper explores further the concept of alternative regionalism, and the extent to which it is applicable to the context of Southeast Asia. In the third section of this paper, the author attempts to analyse civil society's efforts to search for the so-called alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia. Given the deepening of ASEAN integration and the emerging opportunities that ASEAN provide to a wide array of constituents, there are now increasing civil society's interests to engage with ASEAN. Civil society, for example, has been active to influence ASEAN's attempt to establish an ASEAN Charter and the subsequent ASEAN human rights mechanism. Furthermore, the fourth section of this paper examines different perspectives about greater civil society's participation on ASEAN engagement amongst state and non-state actors in the region. Finally, the paper is concluded with final thoughts given to the alternative regionalism and the *people-centred* ASEAN.

Alternative Regionalism in Southeast Asian Context

The notion of *alternative* in regionalism is certainly a matter of relativity and is subject to many interpretations. Despite its increasingly widespread use amongst activists and scholars in Southeast Asia, little effort has been made to clarify the definition of the terms. In general, however, many would agree that, as a word, *alternative* implies to the values, norms, institutions and system that exist outside the traditional, established or mainstream system and institutions. In essence, alternative is a reformist effort to improve the existing system and institutions. Having said this, the so-called *mainstream* and *progressive regionalists* are differed in regard to their interpretation of the substances attached to the notion of alternative regionalism. Although it is not always the case within the Southeast Asian context, but the mainstream regionalists generally favour the neo-liberal principles, whilst progressive regionalists have added socialist flavour in advancing the idea of alternative regionalism. There are also actors that stand in the middle of these two camps that view ASEAN regionalism with a sense of pragmatism.

The use of the word *alternative* by mainstream advocates of regionalism in Southeast Asia, as mentioned in the introduction section, implies to the improvement and/or expansion of ASEAN's existing integration initiatives. Influenced by the regional initiatives pursued by their Western counterparts, such as the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Southeast Asian mainstream regionalism advocates often call for the acceleration or further deepening of ASEAN integration. Prior to the full implementation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 2008, for example, mainstream regional economists and numerous business associations actively lobbied ASEAN and its member governments to go beyond the existing preferential trade agreement (PTA) pursued by the Association. Other mainstream economists and political-scientists also view the alternative of ASEAN regionalism in the form of Pan-Asia, East Asia or Asia-Pacific regionalism.

In contrast, the Southeast Asian progressive regionalists view alternative regionalism in fully different angle than those favoured by the mainstream regionalists. Amongst the relatively politically left-wing oriented activists and scholars, alternative regionalism is used to denote a regional initiative that is rooted from the social movements as a result of lengthy opposition to neo-liberalism. Some civil society groups in Southeast Asia, mostly non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions, use Latin America as their reference point. Recent initiatives in Latin America, such as the Bolivarian Alternative for the People of Our America (ALBA – *Alternativa Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra America*)[5] and the

---

5 ALBA is primarily the response of some of the socialist states in the Latin America to the US-led Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The so-called Cuba-Venezuela Agreement, which was signed on 14th December 2004 by Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro,

Treaty of Commerce for Peoples (TCP),[6] are of common subject of discussions amongst these civil society groups. Having succeeded in resisting the American-led neo-liberal economic agenda of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), these *alternative* regional integration initiatives have been commonly used by Southeast Asian civil society as models in which participatory regionalism can be made possible.

Such *alternative regionalism* efforts in Latin America are not new. During the so-called *first wave* of integration, or *old regionalism* period, there was also a regionalism attempt by the socialist states in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia, which was known then as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Established in 1949, CMEA sought to accelerate economic development and the establishment of a more rational division of labour amongst these socialist states (Robson 1987: 219). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the grouping attempted to expand its membership to include non-socialist states, including Iraq and Mexico (Marer and Montias 1988). Over the years, CMEA eventually became the political tool of these socialist states to counter the emergence of the European Community (EC) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) (Chandra 2008a: 3-4). The grouping, however, ceased to exist in 1991, largely as a result of the fall of communism, as well as internal conflict and divergent national interests amongst member countries.

However, the applicability of the full socialist approach to Southeast Asian regionalism is still open to debate. Although the creation of ALBA was accompanied by noble ideals, it is relatively difficult to implement in an increasingly interdependent world. The full integration of the Southeast Asian economies with the global economy would also make it difficult for the ASEAN to pursue such a form of alternative regionalism. This is not to mention the competitive nature of most of ASEAN economies which is likely to bring about significant challenges for the region's economies to adopt a *barter* trading system such as that employed under the ALBA model. More importantly, however, ASEAN is, and should go, beyond the rhetoric of ideological divide. The Association's lack of influencing power at the international arena has been made up by its efforts to embrace different major global powers through greater cooperation in various different fora (e.g., ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Plus Six, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and so on). At the same time, however, mainstream regionalists have been the main designer behind many of the aforementioned ASEAN's expansion initiatives to include its dialogue partners. It would remain problematic for ASEAN to be relevant for the people in the region if the Association keeps relying on the inputs from the mainstream regionalists and serve as being a tool for the facilitation major powers' political and economic interests in the region.

---

paved the way for the ALBA initiative, which represents an attempt at regional economic integration that is not based on economic liberalisation, but instead on a vision of social welfare and mutual economic aid. Under the aforementioned Cuba-Venezuela Agreement, the former would send 20,000 of its medical staffs and qualified teachers to the latter in exchange of 96,000 barrels of Venezuelan oil per day. Further information about ALBA is available in the Wikipedia (accessed 30 September 2008) at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolivarian_Alternative_for_the_Americas

6 The TCP was an initiative launched in 2006 by the Bolivian Evo Morales administration. President Morales pushed for an alternative trade agreement as soon as he took power after winning a majority election. At the time, Bolivia was under pressure to sign a free trade agreement that was negotiated by his predecessor with strong lobby from the business community. Under this proposal, Bolivia is to pursue regional integration with its neighbouring countries based on the principles of complementarity, cooperation, solidarity, reciprocity, prosperity and respect for other countries' sovereignty. TCP was intended as an offensive trade agreement to challenge the mainstream neo-liberal free trade agreements that were sweeping Latin America. Shortly after being launched on May 2006, the TCP became the trade arm of ALBA (People's Dialogue N/A). For further detail of TCP see also, *inter alia*, Dano (2008: 44-46).

Beyond ideological arguments, this author is of the opinion that the concept of people remains missing in the existing regional project of ASEAN. Precisely because of this, the concept of the people is the key element in the contemporary context of alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia. As a definition, consequently, alternative regionalism in the Southeast Asian context can be referred to as a spontaneous, bottom-up process that recognises the importance of wide arrange of stakeholders in the making of regional systems and institutions. These stakeholders are elements of civil society, which include, but not limited to, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), business organisations, the academic community, trade unions and so on. The pursuance of these regional systems and institutions are not only oriented towards the interests and needs of the people, but should also be *people-centred*. Despite the centrality of the people, state remains an important actor in the regionalisation process as far as its role in facilitating, mediating and channelling the interests of the people in the wider regional context. State actors in Southeast Asia are also of increasing realisation of their limited ability to cope with extensive challenges at the global, regional and national levels. At the same time, the increase maturity of civil society actors to work independently and their ability to tackle issue-specific challenges have made them a natural partner for the state actors in pursuing regional projects. In other words, regional projects are increasingly becoming the share responsibility of state and non-state actors alike.

In the area of political-security of ASEAN cooperation, alternative regionalism would like to include efforts to address and reforms, *inter-alia*, the norms and values of ASEAN, or also known as the ASEAN Way, which is commonly criticised for slowing down the reform process on regional governance and undermining the core issues that are relevant for the people in the region, such as human rights. At its current state, alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia would also involve effort to harmonise the existing norms and values of ASEAN with the international norms and standards, such as, for example, the promotion of human rights, human dignity and human security. More importantly, alternative regionalism in the ASEAN context also seeks for greater degree of intervention amongst member countries. Essentially, alternative regionalism would also base regionalism on the notion of complementarity and solidarity, instead of relying on excessive national interest and competition, which have been favoured by neo-realists and neo-liberal institutionalists respectively.

In terms of economic regionalism, meanwhile, alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia would involve a move away from the market determinant regionalism prevalent since the early 1990s until today into a regionalism that recognises a diverse economic thinking and policy analysis for the advancement of the region's economy. It would favour, for example, fair and managed, rather than free, trade.[7] *Alternative* civil society groups and networks in Southeast Asia also see the importance of a strong social protection element in the process of economic development. Such an element would also to be established on redistributive justice, poverty eradication and growth with equity and non-discrimination.[8] Finally, greater solidarity and understanding amongst communities that is developed out of shared concerns and problems will act as the foundation of the so-called region's identity. The aforementioned definition of alternative regionalism in the Southeast Asian context is, of course, far from perfect. It is at least an effort to highlight and identify components of people-centred regionalism that is currently missing in the ASEAN context.

---

7 As suggested by Walden Bello during a workshop discussion at the 7th Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF), which was held in China on October 2008.

8 See, for example, SAPA (2006a).

Civil Society in Search of Alternative Regionalism in ASEAN

Amongst some of the key elements in the founding document of ASEAN, the ASEAN, or Bangkok, Declaration of 1967 are the acceleration of economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and the promotion of regional peace and stability in the Southeast Asian region. Over the years, elements of the original founding document of ASEAN were improved and expanded to respond the challenges and opportunities that the Association encountered at the time. Not all of these *improvements* were state-led initiatives, and some were implemented as a result of constant push and lobbying from various elements of civil society. The argument that ASEAN is an exclusive club for the policy-makers of its member countries is actually rather inaccurate (Chandra 2008b: 5). In fact, as Chandra and Chavez (2008: 2-3) pointed out, the participation of CSOs has been evident since the early phase of ASEAN co-operation. During the infancy of the Association's cooperation, it was the business and academic communities that took the lead in proposing changes in ASEAN. Under the so-called ASEAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ASEAN-CCI), which was established in 1974, for example, conglomerates of Southeast Asia helped determine the economic policy pursued by the Association and its member countries. The gradual and subsequent acceleration of liberalisation of ASEAN economies in the 1980s and 1990s were also the result of increase influence of these economic actors.[9]

Similarly, a handful of academic think-tanks were also responsible in the shaping of ASEAN's agenda and priorities. The ASEAN Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) and other similar regional think-tanks were also part of the key pillars of ASEAN's informal policy-making bodies. The ASEAN-ISIS,[10] in fact, has evolved as becoming the key actor in developing the concept of the so-called *track-two* diplomacy, which can be described as 'the practice of bringing public intellectuals, academics, government, business, media and other relevant sectors in their private capacity to discuss economic, political, security and other issues at domestic, regional and global levels' (Hernandez 2006: 17). Of course, it is naïve to assume that the track-two is simply a forum of discussion amongst relevant actors. Most individuals actively involved in this network are close with officials in ASEAN and its member countries, whilst some have either close links or direct involvement in ASEAN-CCI and, later, the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC). It is precisely because of this that ASEAN-ISIS and other like-minded think-tanks are capable of penetrating the foreign, security and economic policy-making processes at the regional level. In her article, Carolina Hernandez (2006: 20), a leading figure in the ISIS network, also admitted that the success of this network amongst intellectuals in the region in influencing ASEAN can be seen in: '(1) the institutionalisation of meetings between ASEAN-ISIS and the ASEAN Senior Official Meeting (SOM); (2) the acknowledgement of the role of ASEAN-ISISI in the Joint

---

9 Today, there is also an ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC), which is another platform where the business community is capable to exert much of their influence over ASEAN policy-makers. The establishment of ABAC was actually a decision made by ASEAN leaders at the 7th ASEAN Summit, which was held in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, in 2001. During his speech delivered at the inaugural meeting of the ABAC in April 2003, the former ASEAN Secretary-General, Ong Keng Yong, also stated that the idea of forming ABAC was primarily due to the necessity to 'inject a private-sector perspective into the economic development and integration process in ASEAN. […] All the intra-regional as well as extra regional [economic and trade] initiatives – […] – are targeted at creating a pro-business environment in ASEAN'.

10 Whilst some might describe ASEAN-ISIS as a loose association of think-tanks, a policy-network, or a policy-community, those within the ASEAN-ISIS circle and those who have been in contact with the network would see it as *Track 2* diplomacy (Soesastro *et al.* 2006: 1). The idea of forming an ASEAN-ISIS, as Soesastro et al. further notes, emerged from a discussion between Juruf Wanandi of the Indonesian Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) with the American scholar on ASEAN, Donald Emerson, in the early 1980s (p. 5). A number of subsequent meetings amongst like-minded Southeast Asian institutes finally resulted in the creation of an ASEAN-ISIS as a formal network amongst international and strategic institutes in key Southeast Asian countries. It was at the fourth meeting of these institutes in Singapore, in June 1988, that the ASEAN-ISIS was formally launched.

Communique of the [ASEAN Ministerial Meeting] (AMM) since 1991; [and] (3) the solicitation by ASEAN [Senior Official Meeting on Energy] (SOME) of the views of ASEAN-ISIS on issues they wish to be studied further prior to making official policy'.[11]

To be fair to the ASEAN-ISIS, the network also played critical role in changing the perspectives of ASEAN policy-makers to promote the participation of wider constituents in the Association's decision-making process. ASEAN-ISIS leaders always thought that the interaction between *track one* and *track three* should be enhanced (Caballero-Anthony 2006: 63). Consequently, when the Thai Foreign Minister called for the establishment of the *Congress of ASEAN People* during the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Brunei, in 1995, the ISIS network responded this call by introducing the idea of an *Assembly of the Peoples of ASEAN*, which actually interpreted by ASEAN officials as a possible regional inter-parliamentary union. ASEAN-ISIS, however, wanted a more broadly representative people's assembly that would include representatives from various elements of civil society (Hernandez 1995).

ASEAN-ISIS' *Report of the Eight Southeast Asian Forum*, which was submitted to the ASEAN Senior Official Meeting (SOM) in July 1998, was a turning point which officially started the discussion amongst ASEAN policy-makers about the participation of the people in ASEAN's regional projects. This, and other follow up efforts, facilitated the launching of the so-called ASEAN People's Assembly (APA) in 2000. Subsequently, APA became 'a general meeting of civil society organisations, non-government organisations, and civic organisations from the ten member states of ASEAN … [The Forum] aims to serve as a vessel for articulating and conveying the people's view and interests outside of the formal political channels' (Hernandez 2003: 1). Indeed, it was convened on the rationale that the process of community building in the region must include all layers of society, to make the Association more relevant to the ordinary citizens in each member country (Cheow 2004). APA is therefore one of the initial attempt pursued by the academic community to act as the *bridge* between ASEAN policy makers (track-one) and the rest of civil society groups (or track-three).

Civil society's search of alternative regionalism in ASEAN has been growing significantly since APA was finally launched in 2000. APA itself was relatively successful in gathering various civil society groups across the region to discuss ASEAN-related matters, and since then, ASEAN-ISIS has managed to organise six such events, mostly either in the Philippines or Indonesia. This annual civil society gathering is technically the officially recognised civil society forum by ASEAN and its member governments. Recently, the forum is also facing increasing competition from newer civil society fora and networks across the region. The so-called ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) and the Solidarity for Asian Peoples' Advocacy (SAPA) Working Group (WG) on ASEAN are examples of such newer fora and networks respectively. Another newest addition to the wider networks and fora for civil society engagement with ASEAN are the ASEAN People's Forum (APF) and, the ASEAN-led ASEAN Social Forum (ASF).

The ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) was actually initiated by the Malaysian government as a parallel event to the 11th ASEAN Summit held in Kuala Lumpur in 2005. The Malaysian government at the time commissioned the ASEAN Study Center of the Universiti Teknologi of Mara (UiTM) to work with other Malaysian-based civil society groups to prepare the event. The ACSC, which was attended by around 120 participants from across the region, produced a statement that was presented directly to the ASEAN leaders during the 11th ASEAN Summit. This interface between ASEAN leaders and representatives of civil society groups marked the new turning point in ASEAN-civil society relations as no such occasions had ever been pursued in the past. Although initially the ACSC was intended to be a one-off event, during their meeting with representatives of civil society groups at the 11th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN leaders recognised the ACSC and supported its annual convening.

Unfortunately, the decision of the ASEAN leaders during the Summit to make the ACSC as the formally recognised forum for civil society's engagement with ASEAN was not at all prepared prior the Summit. Consequently, the idea was later dropped off, and the annual convening of the ACSC, with the full support of ASEAN and its member governments, never actually occurred in the following years in the Philippines and Singapore. At the upcoming 14th ASEAN Summit in Thailand, however, civil society will once again presented with the opportunity to have a direct interface with ASEAN leaders.

A new civil society network was also conceived shortly after the 1st ACSC. This network, later known as the Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacies (SAPA), has since then taken the initiative to convene the ACSC as an annual event for civil society groups. Since then, SAPA has also taken the lead in organising two ACSCs, one in Cebu (2006) and the other in Singapore (2007). In December 2008, SAPA also worked with local civil society groups in Thailand to organise the 4th ACSC as well as the first ASEAN People's Forum (APF). SAPA is actually a very new network of Asian NGOs, trade unions, community-based organisations and so on. Established in February 2006, the network now has four working groups, each works on the issue of ASEAN, human rights, migration and labour, and the latest one is on agriculture and rural development.[12] The Working Group on ASEAN is so far the most active amongst all these working groups. One of the key reasons for SAPA's establishment was the recognition of the need of an alternative mechanism, either a forum or a platform, where information and resources could be shared in order to enhance the effectiveness of civil society engagement with various inter-governmental processes that had been rapidly increasing in Asia (SAPA 2006b). Since then, SAPA has become an open platform for consultation, cooperation and coordination amongst Asian social movements and civil society organisations, including NGOs, people's organisations and trade unions. The network also aims to enhance cooperation amongst its members and partners to increase the impact and effectiveness of their engagement with inter-governmental bodies.[13]

Since its establishment in 2006, SAPA has been somehow emerging as the key competitor of traditional civil society networks and fora on ASEAN, including ASEAN-ISIS and its APA. Indeed, many of the original members of SAPA were actively involved in APA activities. However, the strong domination of ASEAN-ISIS, and the fact that APA has in general resulted in modest actual interaction between civil society and ASEAN, has generated disappointment amongst these representatives of civil society. To be fair to ASEAN-ISIS and APA, they both have been successful at least in generating consciousness and interests of wider civil society groups about and on ASEAN. Unfortunately, many regional civil society groups that took part in APA were also strong policy advocates with other multilateral bodies, and they felt that, after several years of engaging ASEAN through APA and ASEAN-ISIS, they could pursue direct engagement *vis-à-vis* ASEAN.[14] Using their experience in dealing with other multilateral bodies,

---

11 Another notable regional think-tank that plays active role in the informal formulation of ASEAN policy-making is the Singapore-based Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). Although both ISEAN-ISIS and ISEAS have similar research programmes (i.e. economics, politics and strategic studies, social and cultural studies, etc.), the two institutions differ in that the former is comprised of think-tanks with *regional* interests at the national level, whilst the latter is simply a regional think-tank. ISEAS attended the formation of ASEAN-ISIS in Bali, Indonesia, in 1984. However, since ISEAS considers itself a *regional* think-tank, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) joined in the ASEAN-ISIS instead to represent Singapore (an informal discussion, on 7 September 2006, with a researcher in one of the academic think-tanks that is part of the ASEAN-ISIS. The name of this individual will remain anonymous throughout the paper).

12 It is also expected that another working group on peace and conflict will be convened in the near future.

13 Apart from ASEAN, SAPA's main targets of advocacy are the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the United Nations (UN) and so on.

14 One recent interesting development is illustrated in the postponement of the 7th APA, initially to be held in Manila in 2008. However, according to the electronic mail sent by the organiser (26 August 2008), it was noted that 'the APA Steering Committee decided it is time to do a stocktaking in the light of developments within ASEAN. A stocktaking meeting is being planned for late February- early March 2009'.

SAPA has been very aggressive in pursuing their advocacy works with ASEAN, and their place in the ASEAN-policy making circle, although still limited, is gradually expanding. The network, for example, has recently been nominated as one of the key interested parties to be consulted with in the development of the terms of reference on the establishment of the ASEAN Human Rights Body (AHRB). At the end of 2008, the Working Group on ASEAN within SAPA also attempts to establish an ASEAN monitoring institution, to be known as the ASEAN People's Centre.[15]

Apart from these networks, fora and institutions, ASEAN, as mentioned earlier, also has a plan to initiate its own civil society forum, which is to be known tentatively as the ASEAN Social Forum (ASF). The Forum is mentioned in the draft (as of February 2008) of the Framework of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Blueprint, which was leaked to civil society networks and groups. This document calls for ASEAN to initiate the ASF on annual basis, with the first Forum supposed to be scheduled by the end of 2008. The Forum, as according to this document further, should 'explore the best means for effective dialogue, consultations and cooperation between and civil society'. It is not clear, however, as to what the added value of this new forum would be given the already extensive civil society groups' networks and fora directed at engaging ASEAN. One possible explanation of this ASEAN-led civil society forum is the intention of ASEAN and its member countries to have a sense of control over civil society activities on ASEAN. It has been indicated at the time of the writing of this paper that the 1st ASF would be held in Manila, on 26-28 November 2008.

According to the ASF concept paper that was prepared by the Philippines host as per 20th September 2008, however, there are significant differences between the ASF and other civil society-led fora. In terms of their objectives, fora such as ACSC and APA only provide CSO positions during the ASEAN Summit as well as on specific major issues that are currently affecting the Association, e.g., ASEAN Charter. On the other hand, ASF would provide an opportunity for cooperation between ASEAN-related organs, sectoral government officials and representatives of civil society to discuss issues in the area of socio-cultural area of ASEAN cooperation. Furthermore, in terms of participation, whereas ACSC and APA would only normally involve officials from ASEAN and/or member governments during the opening and closing ceremonies, the ASF would include officials from ASEAN, member governments and representatives of civil society throughout the event. In addition, whilst the procedure and mechanism of APA and ACSC only include consultation amongst representatives of civil society groups, ASF would enable greater interaction between CSOs and officials of ASEAN and member governments. Finally, whereas ACSC and APA would normally generate declarations and/or recommendations from CSOs to ASEAN leaders, the outcome of ASF would include the result of the consultation between CSO and ASEAN and member governments' officials to be submitted to the ASEAN Secretariat for consideration.

This is, of course, an inaccurate analysis of the organiser of ASF in the Philippines. Civil society has in fact asked the participation of officials from ASEAN and member governments since the inception of many civil society-led ASEAN engagement fora. In contrary, it was in fact ASEAN and member governments' officials that were reluctant to participate fully in civil society events such as ACSC and APA. Most of the time, officials came up with the excuse of tight working schedule, which only allowed them to participate either during the opening or closing ceremony of many of these civil society-led

---

15 The ASEAN People's Centre is expected to be launched on 18th November 2008. The Centre is to be located in Jakarta so as to ensure closer proximity between civil society and ASEAN policy-makers. The APC is to pursue activities such as lobbying and dialogue on behalf of SAPA vis-à-vis ASEAN and the diplomatic community in Jakarta, as well as to coordinate civil society engagement with ASEAN.

events. Whilst ASF is worth pursuing, it is even better if ASEAN and its member governments could instead capitalise on the existing civil society-led ASEAN engagement activities. Unlike ACSC, and APA to a certain extent, ASF is likely to generate strong enthusiasm only amongst government-backed non-governmental entities, instead of those independent ones. Should this to occur, it is very difficult that ASF is capable to bring about significant and critical inputs capable of reforming ASEAN.

The latest addition to the wide array of civil society networks and fora on ASEAN is the ASEAN People's Forum (APF). The first initiative of this forum will be conducted prior to the 14th ASEAN Summit, in Thailand, in December 2008. Thai government has also reportedly agreed to commit up to 10 million baht for the successful implementation of this event. On top of all those networks and fora, international NGOs (INGOs) are also increasingly keen to engage with ASEAN. Major INGOs, such as Amnesty International, Oxfam and Action Aid, are currently working to design the appropriate strategy to work with ASEAN and civil society groups engaging the Association. The relevance of ASEAN for INGOs is particularly evident during ASEAN's humanitarian response on the Cyclone Nargis that hit Myanmar on May 2008. Majority of INGOs that have the chance to work in Myanmar and had interacted with ASEAN found the Association's humanitarian efforts as useful and an important step for the possible improvement of situation inside the country.

So what motivates civil society to seek for an alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia? Elsewhere this author has outlined several reasons behind the increase civil society's interests to engage with ASEAN.[16] To start with, civil society groups are both excited and concerned about the deepening of ASEAN cooperation. ASEAN's intention to establish the ASEAN Community by 2015 and the impacts it may bring to the welfare of the people in the region, in particular, have attracted the attention of many civil society groups. Precisely because of this, civil society groups in the region are of increasing recognition of the need to influence ASEAN policy-making process. In the area of politics and security, civil society groups see the potential of influencing ASEAN to expand its political and security cooperation to include the recognition of, for example, human rights, dignity and security, all of which goes beyond the traditional interpretation of political and security cooperation in the region.[17] In economic-related matters, civil society groups are interested to have a bigger say in the decision making of ASEAN's external economic ventures with its dialogue partners. Bilateral trade agreements pursued by ASEAN and its dialogue partners, such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement and the future ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement, for example, have been viewed sceptically by the region's NGOs, trade unions, community-based organisations (CBOs) and so on. The scope of civil society interests are even more diverse in the area of socio-cultural aspect of ASEAN cooperation, ranging from environment, women, youth, all the way to the question of regional identity of ASEAN.

'People-oriented' vs. 'People-Centred' ASEAN: Which Ways towards Alternative Regionalism in Southeast Asia?

During the celebration of the forty-first anniversary of ASEAN in August 2008, regional civil society groups and networks organised a public debate with officials from ASEAN-related organs concerning the challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the ASEAN Charter and the three ASEAN blueprints, including on the political-security, economic and socio-cultural aspects of ASEAN cooperation, towards the creation of an ASEAN Community. The debate was also targeted at the issue

---

16 See, for example, Chandra (2008b: 6-7).
17 See, for example, SAPA (2006c).

of ASEAN as a *people-centred* organisation. At this meeting, a high-level ASEAN official criticised the civil society's use of the term *people-centred* ASEAN, and proposed instead the use of the more preferred term by ASEAN and its member governments, which is the *people-oriented* ASEAN. Although on the surface the two terms appears to be similar, they both have different meanings and can be interpreted in different ways. The people-oriented ASEAN can be interpreted that the policies pursued by the Associations' policy-makers shall be oriented towards the concerns and interests of the people. However, under this principle, the final decision making still lies amongst the region's political elites. In contrast, ASEAN as a *people-centred organisation* calls for the grouping to place people at the heart, or centre, of its decision-making process. Core policies that affect the well-being and livelihood of the people across the region should, therefore, be determined by and for the people through democratic means.

ASEAN officials' reservation about the *people-centred* concept is not without reasons. Having been a relatively closed, non-accountable, and non-transparent to the people for over four decades, it is certainly difficult for ASEAN policy-makers to surrender their decision-making power to the people.[18] Indeed, given the history of ASEAN, the introduction of the so-called people-oriented ASEAN is already in itself an alternative to the existing regionalisation efforts in Southeast Asia. ASEAN policy-makers, particularly those coming from the relatively more democratic countries of Southeast Asia, would also argue that their voice represents the concerns and interests of the people since most of them are democratically elected through fair and open election. Overall, the willingness of ASEAN to adopt *people-oriented* term has in itself signified a dramatic reorientation of the Association's *raison d'être'* (Collins 2008: 314). Elsewhere, Collins (2003) also suggests that although member countries of ASEAN committed themselves to peace, freedom and prosperity of their people, an examination of ASEAN's history reveals the centrality of state security and, specifically, the safeguarding of the state elite. Naturally, a dramatic shift from state-centred to people-centred policy-making process would be a challenging task to pursue by policy-makers in the region.

Nonetheless, civil society groups attempt to pursue the highest call in their efforts to reform ASEAN. It is precisely because of this that the notion of *people-centred*, instead of *people-oriented* ASEAN, has been at the core of their advocacy works and messages of alternative civil society groups and networks. Some activists, for example, express reservation about the notion of *people-oriented* ASEAN because the term still provides too significant space for policy-makers to decide matters that are too important for the welfare and wellbeing of the people in the region.[19] Moreover, the same activists also further argue that the practice of the so-called *democracy* in Southeast Asian countries is still open to debate, particularly since vote-buying is still prevalent in many of these relatively young democracies. A *people-oriented* ASEAN does call for policy-makers to listen to the will of the people, but it also allows them to make the final call whether or not the will of the people should be implemented. It, therefore, becomes problematic for these civil society groups to let a handful of the region's policy-makers to make the final decisions on key issues that matter the most for the people of Southeast Asia.

---

18 The importance of a *people-oriented* or *people-centred* ASEAN is not particularly new amongst ASEAN policy-makers. Several prominent ASEAN figures have been emphasising the importance of involving people in ASEAN regional initiatives since the 1980s. The former Indonesian Foreign Minister, Adam Malik, for instance, once stated that "the shaping of a future of peace, friendship and cooperation is far too important to be left to government and government officials. … [as such, there is a need for] ever-expanding involvement and participation of the people" (as cited Alatas 2001: 109).

19 Informal discussions were conducted with several representatives of a member of SAPA Working Group on ASEAN over electronic means on 3rd October 2008.

In contrast, *people-centred* ASEAN allows more direct involvement and integration of the people in the decision-making process of ASEAN. Under this principle, policy-makers matter as far as their role in facilitating the inputs from relevant constituents as well as the formulation of the policy proposal. The final draft of this policy proposal would then be consulted further with relevant non-state actors across the region. Openness and transparency on the side of state actors also make up the core component of *people-centred* ASEAN. Whilst having the policy proposal consulted, the people, or relevant non-state actors, should be provided with sufficient information which allows them to make the necessary judgement about the proposed policy. The people are essentially at the heart of the decision-making process.

Whilst noble in principle, the concept of *people-centred* ASEAN is potentially difficult to implement, and is likely to undermine the progress of ASEAN integration. To start with, should this principle is adopted, ASEAN and its member governments are required to bear additional cost attached to the implementation of such a consultative process. Unfortunately, civil society has not developed a possible solution to address this concern. It is certainly problematic if each policy pushed by ASEAN and member governments should go through, for example, a referendum process. Should this process to go ahead, moreover, there is also a likelihood that the process of ASEAN integration is slowing down. More importantly, ASEAN is also likely to face difficulty to carry out prompt actions to respond to crises. One potential solution to this problem is for all interested parties to agree on the standards, categorisations and mechanisms which would determine the type of policy require such an approval from the people.

Having said this, the promotion of the principle of *people-centred* ASEAN by the region's civil society groups is also likely to face difficulties for several reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier in this section, the adoption of the people-oriented principle by the region's policy-makers is already a significant step towards reform in ASEAN. Although state actors increasingly recognise the potential role of civil society to complement the activities of the Association, there remains intention amongst state elite to determine, direct and control the future of ASEAN (Collins 2008: 316). Secondly, less democratic member countries of ASEAN are very likely to be very hostile to this concept. For the newer member countries of ASEAN, such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV), in particular, the Association's *ASEAN Way*, which, to a certain extent, allows greater space for the state to exert control over their population, has been one of the key attractions that determined these states to join ASEAN in the first place. Thirdly, the possible adoption of the *people-centred* principle may also potentially break up the unity of ASEAN. In the case of Myanmar, for example, the growing inclination of ASEAN to pursue more active engagement with civil society, as well as the increase activism amongst ASEAN member states to promote change inside the country, has caused the ruling junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), to reconsider its position in ASEAN. Myanmar had in fact officially applied for the membership to join the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) earlier in 2008.[20] Whatever the setbacks presented by the adoption of the *people-centred* principle, however, this is the reformed norm and value that is favoured by civil society groups and networks in the region. For what it is worth, the principle should be kept as a higher objective in which civil society can pursue its advocacy work on in the future.

---

20 As reported in the India-Server (2008).

Conclusion: Alternative Regionalism in Making in Southeast Asia?

In its own context, alternative regionalism is certainly in the making in Southeast Asia, and civil society is playing a crucial role in promoting it. Various actors in Southeast Asian regionalisation process have different ideas as to what *alternative regionalism* entails of in the ASEAN context. One common thread in the promotion of alternative regionalism amongst these non-state actors is the question of the participation of the people in ASEAN policy-making process. Civil society in the region is increasingly calling for ASEAN to be more down-to-earth and inclusive in its efforts to shape and determine the system of governance in the region. In recent years, civil society's search for an alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia has been expanded, with new institutions, fora and networks are established to allow greater space for civil society's participation in ASEAN-related activities. At the same time, ASEAN has responded positively to this call, and encourages its officials to become more involved in civil-society-led activities. The Association has also launched its new principle of people-oriented ASEAN. However it is not clear as to whether these initiatives are sufficient to satisfy the demand of wider civil society groups for the Association to adopt a more optimistic people-centred principle. This should form a key concern for ASEAN policy-makers, particularly as the region is moving towards the establishment of ASEAN Community in 2015.

Bibliography

Alatas, A. (2001), *ASEAN: An Association in Search of People or the People's Search for an Association'*, Report of the First ASEAN People's Assembly, Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

ASEAN Secretariat (2008), *Draft of Framework Blueprint for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (2007-2015)*, draft as of February 2008.

Chandra, A. C. (2008a), *Indonesia in the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement: Nationalists and Regional Integration Strategy*, Lanham, MA: Lexington Books.

_____ (2008b), *The Effects of Civil Society Organisations in the Institutional Development and Community Building in the ASEAN Region*, a Paper presented at the Sentosa Roundtable on Asian Security, organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore.

Chandra, A. C. and J. Chavez (2008), 'Civil Society's Engagement with ASEAN: An Overview', in A. C. Chandra and J. J. Chavez, eds., *ASEAN @ 40: Civil Society Reflections on Southeast Asian Regionalism*, Manila: Southeast Asia Committee for Advocacy (SEACA), pp. 1-17.

Chavez, J. J. (2005), 'The Search for Alternative Regionalism in Southeast Asia', *Women in Action*, April Issue, available online at: http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-6426006/The-search-for-alternative-regionalism.html

Cheow, E. T. C. (2004), 'Socioeconomic Challenges for the ASEAN People's Assembly', *The Jakarta Post*, 24 July, available online at: http://www.csis.or.id/regpart_news.asp?tab=0&nid=17&id=2

Collins, A. (2008), 'A People-Oriented ASEAN: A Door Ajar or Closed for Civil Society Organisations?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 313-31.

_____ (2003), *Security and Southeast Asia*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Daño, E. (2008), *Building People Oriented and Participatory Alternative Regionalism Models in Southeast Asia: An Exploratory Study*, Manila: AFA and Asiadhrra.

Fawcett, L., and M. Serrano (2005), eds., *Regionalism and Governance in the Americas: Continental Drift*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hernandez, C. (2006), 'Track Two and Regional Policy: The ASEAN ISIS in ASEAN Decision Making', in H. Soesastro *et al.*, eds., *Twenty Two Years of ASEAN ISIS: Origin, Evolution and Challenges of Track Two Diplomacy*, Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies and the ASEAN Institute for Strategic and International Studies, pp. 17-30.

_____ (2003), 'Introduction and Summary: ASEAN People's Assembly 2003', in ASEAN Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) and Institute for Strategic and Development Studies (ISDS), eds., *Towards an ASEAN Community of Caring Societies*, Manila: ISDS, pp. 1-9.

Hernandez, C. G. (1995), *A People's Assembly: A Novel Mechanism for Bridging the North-South Divide in ASEAN*, unpublished manuscript.

Hettne, B., A. Inotai and O. Sunkel (1999), eds., *Globalism and the New Regionalism*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Hettne, B., F. Söderbaum (2000), 'Theorising the Rise of Regionness', *New Political Economy*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 457-473.

India-Server (2008), 'Myanmar Wants SAARC Membership, India Backing It', *India-Server*, 20 May, available online at (accessed 3 October 2008): http://www.india-server.com/news/myanmar-wants-saarc-membership-india-1242.html

Marer, P. and M. Montias (1988), 'The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance', in A. M. El-Agraa, ed., *International Economic Integration*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988.

Ong Keng Yong (2003), *Opening Address at the Inaugural Meeting of the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC)*, 10 April 2003, ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, available online at (accessed 2 October 2008): http://www.aseansec.org/14686.htm

People's Dialogue (N/A), 'Key Proposals for Latin American Alternative Regional Integration: ALBA and TCP', *People's Dialogue*, available online (accessed 7 October 2008).

Robson, P. (1987), *The Economics of International Integration*, London: Allen and Unwin Ltd.

SAPA Working Group on ASEAN (2006a), *Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA) Working Group on ASEAN Submission on the Economic Pillar for the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter*, Unpublished SAPA documentation.

_____ (2006b), *SAPA: Background and Context*, Bangkok, Unpublished SAPA documentation.

_____ (2006c), *Solidarity Asian People's Advocacies (SAPA) Submission to the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter, 17 April 2006*, Unpublished SAPA documentation.