

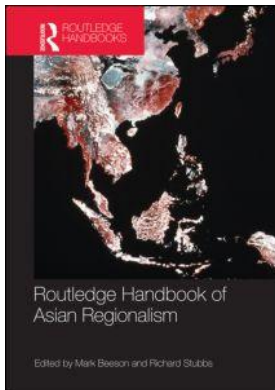
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Mark Beeson, Richard Stubbs

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Helen E. S. Nesadurai

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The ASEAN People's Forum (APF) as authentic social forum

Regional civil society networking for an alternative regionalism

Helen E. S. Nesadurai

Regionalism in Southeast Asia is commonly understood as those processes of interstate interactions, dialogue and cooperation that take place under the purview of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a key site of governance through which its member states arrive at common understandings of shared problems and devise possible ways of addressing them. These processes are guided by the 'ASEAN Way' norms of sovereignty and non-interference and the ASEAN diplomatic culture of non-coercive, consultative and consensus-seeking interactions and decision-making. The ASEAN emphasis on consultation and consensus seeking applies largely to interactions between the ASEAN member states, with ASEAN cooperation on regional governance controlled and driven, however, by the region's political and bureaucratic elite, with little room for civil society inputs or participation in regional governance processes.

Although the regional scholars' network, the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) is often cited as an example of civil society participation in regional governance, it is, in reality, a network that is close to the region's governing elite, dominated as it is by state-sanctioned or state-sponsored research institutes and think tanks (Acharya 2003: 383).¹ Consequently, it has not always been able to advocate moving beyond the norms and functional priorities determined by ASEAN member governments, particularly the more conservative members (Acharya 2004; Dosch 2009). Where the network and other non-state actors *have* succeeded in influencing ASEAN to adopt progressive norms, such as human rights and democratization, these have been offset by ASEAN's continued adherence to the sovereignty/non-interference principle and intergovernmental, consensus-based decision-making.² In many cases, new norms advanced by these actors have had to be reworked to ensure that they conform to the parameters set by official elites for regional governance (see Acharya 2004). ASEAN leaders, moreover, are averse to discussing at open forums 'sensitive' issues with domestic political implications, such as democratization, marginalization and exclusions, rights and social justice.

However, the region's elite-dominated, conservative agenda does not go unchallenged. Aside from challenges from more progressive members of the ASEAN-ISIS network,³ there is also a vibrant and expanding 'alternative' regional civil society space in Southeast Asia in which a variety of non-elite civil society groups participate to advance economic, political and social causes that are

often at odds with official agendas and interests (Acharya 2003; Caballero–Anthony 2006; Nesadurai 2010).⁴ Regional civil society activism – networking, advocacy and collective action – represents a form of regionalism commonly termed ‘regionalism from below’ in academic literature, a phrase that aptly captures its roots in non-elites acting collaboratively to address especially the concerns of groups and people who are neglected, marginalized or adversely affected by prevailing national and regional policies, and to advance alternative conceptions of regionalism. Although networking amongst civil society is one core dimension of ‘regionalism from below’, bottom-up regionalism is also characterized by institutionalized ‘people’s forums’ that usually meet parallel to official meetings of international organizations. In these public spheres, civil society organizations (CSOs) come together to debate pressing issues, challenging officials to explain their policies and articulating alternative approaches to governance that these groups deem to be more inclusive and just as compared to the status quo.⁵ The World Social Forum and the European Social Forum are examples. Closer to home, people’s forums have been organized parallel to summits of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and especially the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) (Acharya 2003; Gilson 2007).

In Southeast Asia, the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA, 2000–9) functioned as a social forum for close to a decade while the ASEAN People’s Forum (APF) emerged out of the annual ASEAN Civil Society Conferences (ACSC) first organized in 2005 (the 4th ACSC convened in February 2009 was formally designated the ASEAN People’s Forum). Otherwise known as track-3 mechanisms, civil society forums such as APA and APF have been tacitly accepted by the ASEAN states, even if somewhat reluctantly by some members, as avenues through which the ASEAN states can engage regional civil society and, consequently, enhance the Association’s links to the ordinary people of ASEAN and, through that, help build an ASEAN community.⁶ The first APA meeting in 2000, which was attended by civil society groups, business representatives and ASEAN officials (albeit in their private capacity; the ASEAN secretary-general attends in his official capacity) illustrates this shift in official sentiment towards regional civil society, leading Acharya to suggest that APA ‘could become a useful vehicle for a more participatory form of regionalism by providing an arena for debates and discussions between states and citizens about subjects over which governments have thus far exercised strict control’ (Acharya 2003: 386). An effective participatory regionalism also requires ASEAN governments and officials to be prepared to create space for these groups in ASEAN deliberations and decision-making processes. Yet, in practice ASEAN has not always been supportive of APA, which was an initiative of ASEAN-ISIS to bring ASEAN closer to the people (Caballero–Anthony 2006). Civil society groups have also been critical of APA for failing to create formal links between regional civil society and ASEAN officials, and for being too much under the control of ASEAN-ISIS, regarded by its detractors as being too close to the governing elite. To reclaim their independent voice, civil society groups used the annual ACSC (first organized in 2005) as the platform from which to launch the APF in February 2009 (Chandra 2009). In 2009, ASEAN-ISIS voted to end APA, leaving the APF as the sole people’s platform in Southeast Asia.

Given the experience and limitations of the Assembly, what then are the prospects of the Forum taking up the mantle to enhance participatory regionalism in ASEAN, especially given continuing authoritarian tendencies in most ASEAN states and the sovereignty-centric ASEAN diplomatic culture that curbs debate and action on many issues championed by regional civil society? Even if the APF faces restrictions from governments and ASEAN officials, does the forum, and its associated civil society networks, hold any broader significance for Southeast Asian regional governance and Asian regionalism more broadly? The rest of this chapter addresses these issues in two parts. It will focus on how the contested dynamics of civil society regionalism in Southeast Asia between an elite and a non-elite civil society network led to the latter’s emergence as a significant ‘network actor’, one that exercised its organizational and intellectual leadership to build

sufficient consensus between regional CSOs on an alternative project of regional governance that challenges core elements of the official regional project. The final part of the chapter considers the implications of this positive development in civil society networking and advocacy for participatory regionalism in ASEAN and for 'regionalism from below' in Asia.

From the assembly to the forum: civil society seeks meaningful interaction with ASEAN

Despite the curbs placed on voluntary associational activities in Southeast Asia, especially in authoritarian settings where the state sponsors, or even *creates* CSOs, the region boasts a vibrant but fragmented civil society that nevertheless constitutes a valuable space 'for political engagement and transformation' (Weiss 2008: 152).⁷ In this realm, two classes can be distinguished. A small, non-state yet elite set of actors comprising scholars' networks such as ASEAN-ISIS and regional business councils tends to enjoy a comfortable and collaborative relationship with officials. In contrast, a vast non-elite or subaltern, and more fragmented, class comprising a variety of CSOs, labour groups and social movements often struggles to get a hearing from governments, usually because these groups and their causes threaten the governing status quo through their core emphasis on people-empowerment.⁸ Among this class, developmental-type CSOs that focus primarily on meeting the functional needs of particular constituencies tend to get a better hearing from officials as they are considered to be less troublesome than CSOs that engage in political advocacy. Although non-elite CSOs that engage in advocacy do not enjoy a close and comfortable relationship with authoritative actors, nor hanker after such a relationship, they are not averse to engaging with states and international organizations such as ASEAN in order to advance their cause – usually to transform prevailing governance arrangements in ways that emphasize rights, democracy, justice and public participation. These are issues that many Southeast Asian governments under-emphasize in their top-down, developmentalist approach to political, economic and social governance. The line between these two classes of civil society is sometimes blurred, with elite networks such as ASEAN-ISIS often advocating fundamental changes in ASEAN. Nevertheless, this distinction between the two is useful if we are to understand the contested nature of civil society regionalism in Southeast Asia, particularly non-elite civil society's growing preference for the ASEAN People's Forum (APF) over the Assembly. Although the ASEAN People's Assembly (APA), through the leadership of ASEAN-ISIS, had brought regional civil society closer to official ASEAN, civil society groups saw the scholars' network as a barrier to the APA becoming a more authentic expression of civil society priorities, perspectives and participation.

First convened in November 2000 on the Indonesian island of Batam off the Singapore coast, the APA was the first platform aimed explicitly at bringing non-elite CSOs and other grassroots groups into dialogue with regional officials. That such a forum could be formed in Southeast Asia and under the auspices of ASEAN, long known for its elitism and remoteness from the region's people, was the result of the leadership of ASEAN-ISIS, which had actively lobbied for civil society engagement with ASEAN since the 1990s.⁹ However, there were two other factors that facilitated the realization of such an idea: (a) the ready presence of a vibrant and growing regional civil society in Southeast Asia that was willing to engage with ASEAN; and (b) the new push by ASEAN to build an ASEAN Community, which not only invited CSO attention on ASEAN but also led to recognition on the part of ASEAN officials that the Association had to consult more with regional civil society in order to realize its goal of building a community of caring societies.

Many CSOs had not tried very hard to engage ASEAN before the 1997–8 Asian Financial Crisis (Caballero–Anthony 2006: 64). Instead, they directed their advocacy towards the more powerful multilateral organizations, whose neo-liberal rules and programmes were seen as more

likely to undermine people's well-being, rather than a weakly institutionalized ASEAN with little in the way of binding regional rules and programmes that could pose a threat (Chandra 2006: 74). CSOs had even targeted their advocacy towards APEC and ASEM, which were seen as champions of neo-liberal economic governance.¹⁰ However, CSOs began to view ASEAN in a different light from the late 1990s and especially following ASEAN's announcement in 2003 of its ASEAN Community project, which envisaged a deepening of regional integration first begun under the ASEAN Free Trade Area. CSOs worried by the economic and social dislocations of economic liberalization and integration initiatives, however, also saw an opportunity presented by the social pillar of the three-pillared ASEAN Community project to embed a more rights-based and socially just form of economic governance in the region. With ASEAN attempting to reposition itself as a rules-based organization through the ASEAN Charter, CSOs became convinced that engaging ASEAN as another authoritative actor could be productive. A good part of this shift was due to advocacy by the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (AsiaDHRRA), a regional civil society network on rural development, that convinced other CSOs that their respective global or local agendas merited their engagement with ASEAN (Ramirez 2008: 3). By this time, regional officials had also come to appreciate the value of CSOs' links with, and deep knowledge of, local communities on issues as varied as social protection schemes, HIV/AIDS, women's development, youth and drugs (Nesadurai 2004). The growing openness within a number of ASEAN states to engage in dialogue with their citizens meant that these governments were also more willing to support ASEAN engagement with regional civil society (Acharya 2003).¹¹ As a result of these developments, the ASEAN-ISIS idea for non-elite groups in the region to engage in closer dialogue with regional officials through a people's assembly found a receptive audience on all sides.

ASEAN-ISIS performed a number of critical roles with respect to APA – as its 'convenor, its fund-raiser, its facilitator, its spokesperson, its driving force in the initial years until it takes a life of its own' (Caballero-Anthony 2006: 64). Its leadership was invaluable in successfully launching APA, given the numerous setbacks the Assembly faced from member governments.¹² Although APA brought together a wide cast of regional CSOs at the six forums held until its closure in 2009, its function as a platform for deliberation with regional officials had been undermined by the latter's reluctance to participate fully in APA, preferring to attend only the opening and closing ceremonies (Chandra 2009: 8). With the exception of the secretary-general, even when ASEAN officials attended the annual APA meetings, they did so in a private capacity, ostensibly to allow for a frank exchange of views between civil society and officials. This did not always happen, however, because many officials could not step out of their official roles (Morada 2008). Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, this approach accorded the APA sessions lesser status than forums in which ASEAN officials participate in their official capacity (Nesadurai 2004). In contrast, ASEAN's engagement with business groups has been institutionalized through the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC), which is often consulted on matters pertaining to economic issues and ASEAN's economic integration programme. ASEAN has also institutionalized the link between ASEAN senior officials and ASEAN-ISIS. Although APA may have enhanced ASEAN's 'participatory' credentials by providing a public space for people's voices to be heard by ASEAN officials, the Assembly's official statements were formally conveyed to ASEAN through ASEAN-ISIS. For regional civil society, it was frustrating that no direct, formal interface had been established between ASEAN leaders and the civil society groups meeting through APA (Morada 2008: 5).

Civil society's frustrations with APA were in marked contrast to CSO's embracing of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) first organized in Malaysia in December 2005 alongside the 11th ASEAN Summit. Although the Malaysian government commissioned the ASEAN

Study Centre of the Universiti Teknologi Mara to convene the Conference, CSOs were involved in the preparations for the event and were pleased that for the first time a CSO-prepared conference statement was directly presented to the ASEAN leaders by CSO representatives rather than through a mediator, as was the case with APA (SEACA 2005: 140; Chongkittavorn 2009). This was the direct civil society-ASEAN interface that CSOs had long been expecting for APA. ASEAN also announced that it would recognize the ACSC as the 'formal platform' for CSOs, to be convened in conjunction with the annual Leaders' Summits (Ramirez 2008: 6). Civil society's shift in preference towards the ACSC was accompanied by the formation of a new regional CSO network – the Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA) – following the 1st ACSC.¹³ SAPA took the lead in organizing further conferences parallel to the ASEAN summits. However, the 2nd ACSC held in conjunction with the 12th ASEAN Summit was not deemed to be the official civil society platform by the Philippine host government, which chose to accord that status to APA – seen as less threatening by the Arroyo administration, which was grappling with challenges to its legitimacy from vociferous Philippine CSOs (Ramirez 2008: 7). Singapore organized the 3rd ACSC but without an interface session between leaders and CSO representatives (Chongkittavorn 2009). The 4th and 5th ACSCs, both convened in Thailand in February and October 2009, were also designated the 1st and 2nd ASEAN People's Forum (APF).¹⁴ The 6th ACSC in Vietnam in September 2010 has been designated the 6th APF (APF 2010), effectively turning all previous ACSCs into APF sessions.

In light of these developments, and at the behest of the German foundation that was now APA's main funder, ASEAN-ISIS undertook a review of APA in 2009 to decide whether to continue with the Assembly (Interviewee #1 Singapore, August 2010).¹⁵ Although a number of ASEAN-ISIS members and CSOs agreed that having both the Assembly and the Forum could only be good for ASEAN-civil society engagement, ASEAN-ISIS in the end chose to close the book on APA, deciding that it had indeed fulfilled its goal to bring civil society closer to official ASEAN. The burden of organizing the six APA meetings held thus far, which had been placed on just one or two ASEAN-ISIS member institutes, also played a part in the decision to end APA (Interview #2, Kuala Lumpur, June 2010).¹⁶

SAPA and the Forum: a non-elite network actor and the new public sphere

For regional CSOs, APF is clearly the more authentic social forum. Although both APA and APF enabled deliberations amongst CSOs, labour and local community groups, as well as broad social movements, ASEAN-ISIS was seen to be dominating the Assembly, monopolizing civil society's engagement with official ASEAN, acting as gatekeeper to restrict public participation in APA and even making it difficult for civil society to develop a concerted position on regional economic governance (Collins 2007: 222; Chandra 2009: 5–8). Although each year's APA agenda involved inputs from regional civil society, the latter was not involved in any significant way in decision-making in APA, which was the prerogative of ASEAN-ISIS. This is why regional CSOs consulted on the future of APA indicated their willingness to support maintaining the Assembly if civil society was accorded a place at the APA decision-making table (Interview #2 Kuala Lumpur, June 2010). Moreover, a common civil society position on economic governance was difficult to achieve through APA because ASEAN-ISIS endorsement of ASEAN economic integration was at odds with civil society's objection to the neo-liberal elements of the ASEAN Economic Community project, which focuses extensively on competitiveness and productivity but fails to integrate workers' rights, social justice principles and environmental considerations within the economic integration agenda and work plan. Regional CSOs with considerable experience of

engaging other multilateral organizations preferred to engage ASEAN directly rather than through an intermediary such as ASEAN-ISIS, which was so close to the ASEAN governing elite (Chandra 2009: 7). By 2005, the ASEAN Secretariat was also reaching out to regional CSOs, meeting specifically with the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), the Southeast Asian Committee for Advocacy (SEACA) and AsiaDHRRA at the ASEAN Secretariat to discuss ways to bring CSOs closer to ASEAN processes. This initial meeting led to the first regional CSO consultation on ASEAN in 2005, which was also attended by the ASEAN secretary-general and senior Secretariat staff (Ramirez 2008: 6). The ACSC was acknowledged as the platform through which regional CSOs would engage with ASEAN on an annual basis.

Following the 1st ACSC held in Kuala Lumpur, SAPA was formed in 2006 through the efforts of FORUM-ASIA, SEACA, AsiaDHRRA and Focus on the Global South (FOCUS) (Ramirez 2008: 6). SAPA has become a fairly representative regional advocacy network, with a membership of about 100 national and regional CSOs and CSO networks that also participate in SAPA-organized annual regional civil society consultations. These consultations are on a wide range of concerns affecting Asian communities in the areas of human rights and democracy; globalization, trade, finance and labour; sustainable development and environment; and peace and human security (SAPA 2007). The central theme of SAPA advocacy is people empowerment, especially of those marginalized or adversely affected by the governing status quo, as well as people's participation in official governance processes (ThinkCentre 2009). To accomplish these goals, the network aims to improve 'communication, cooperation and coordination among non-governmental organizations operating regionally' (SAPA 2007).

Organizational and intellectual leadership and the forging of an alternate regionalism

For more effective civil society advocacy on governance, Richard Falk (1998: 109) argues that CSOs need to develop common positions on key governance issues and reach a consensus on alternatives to official governance. They also need to direct advocacy towards relevant authoritative actors, principally the state and international organizations. Important to this task is organizational and intellectual leadership to (a) convince CSOs that they need to collaborate and present a unified front; (b) consolidate a coherent counter-governance project from the myriad resistances to different parts of the hegemonic project; and (c) coordinate the production and sharing of alternate sources of knowledge through which counter-positions to the hegemonic regional governance arrangement can be developed and coalitions generated out of disparate groups. Although the strength of CSOs often rests on each group specializing on a single issue, the task of challenging hegemonic governance arrangements requires at the least the articulation of a coherent counter-governance project that draws on common principles from these different issue areas.

The organizational structure and work programme of the SAPA network has helped it in its task of getting CSOs in the region to work together in lobbying ASEAN, principally by convincing them of the 'regional nature of the issues they confront' (Ramirez 2008: 7). It has also aided the development of a coherent counter-regional project. SAPA networking goes beyond Southeast Asia, covering South Asia and Northeast Asia as well; in all three subregions, the network's core mission is to articulate a more progressive regional governance than that proposed by official regional organizations. In Southeast Asia, SAPA's working group on ASEAN, comprising about 40 CSOs based in Southeast Asia, leads the network in lobbying for enhanced civil society participation in ASEAN processes and in developing a unified position on ASEAN's various policies and programmes (SAPA 2007; ThinkCentre 2009). A similar regional working group handles the research

and advocacy programmes for Northeast Asia, while SAPA's South Asian work programme is conducted through an already existing South Asian CSO network – SANTI (South Asia Network Against Torture and Impunity) – established in Bangladesh to lobby the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). SAPA's advocacy in these subregions is also conducted through people's forums – the Asia-Europe People's Forum and the SAARC People's Forum (SAPA 2007: 9). Aside from its organizational structure and work programme, Marlene Ramirez, the secretary-general of AsiaDHRRA, credits 'a new generation of CSO leaders ... prepared to cross political lines and traditions to form broad-based partnerships', unlike in the past, as key to SAPA's consolidation as a network actor, able to forge a high degree of unity amongst very diverse organizations each with its own legitimate area of focus (Ramirez 2008: 8).

SAPA's alternative model of Southeast Asian regionalism comprises substantive and procedural dimensions. In substantive terms, SAPA challenged each of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community – ASEAN Political and Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (SAPA 2006a, b & c). Advocating 'a people-centred and people-empowered' regionalism, SAPA emphasizes the centrality of human rights, human dignity and human security in ASEAN's framework for political and security cooperation, recognizing also that the state can constitute a source of insecurity for the region's peoples (SAPA 2006a: 84; Dosch 2009: 80). On economic governance, SAPA emphasizes redistributive justice, equitable growth and labour rights; for sociocultural community building, it stresses the centrality of entitlements and freedoms while advocating a rights-based and human security approach to the issue of migrant workers, which contrasts with the national security framework through which ASEAN member governments tend to view the matter (SAPA 2006c: 102). SAPA's input to the ASEAN Charter process further reflects these principles. At the September 2010 APF in Vietnam, SAPA called for a fourth pillar on the environment to be made part of the ASEAN Community so that crucial issues of climate change, natural resource conservation and management, and environmental issues would be addressed in a coherent manner rather than in piecemeal fashion through the Socio-Cultural Community pillar, where environmental issues are currently parked with sundry other items on social and cultural cooperation (Uy 2010). In procedural terms, SAPA has called on ASEAN to recognize and include seven key stakeholders, including trade unions, NGOs, and peoples' movements in ASEAN policy-making processes (SAPA 2006a: 87). In addition, it advocates a social dialogue between ASEAN and regional civil society as part of the ASEAN Economic Community pillar (SAPA 2006b: 96).

In developing these concerted positions, SAPA draws on the collective wisdom of CSOs that emphasize research as a key resource for their advocacy work. The region boasts a number of CSOs such as FOCUS, Third World Network, Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA), Asia-Pacific Research Network (APRN) and others that produce research papers on regional and global governance institutions and processes (Caouette 2006). By developing alternate or critical knowledge that deconstructs prevailing concepts, policies and practices related (especially) to neo-liberal economic globalization and its governance, these CSOs usually offer well-argued papers to support alternative governance arrangements that emphasize social justice, ecological issues, and the economic rights of workers, local communities and marginalized groups (Nesadurai 2010: 18–19). It is through these works and those of other network members that SAPA has produced position papers on the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Community project (see SAPA 2006a, b & c). A fairly coherent alternative regionalism has, therefore, emerged out of research-based networking and advocacy through the SAPA network and in institutionalized public spaces such as the APF, constituting a counter-hegemonic challenge to the dominant ASEAN framework of conservatism, illiberal political governance and neo-liberal economics.

SAPA's achievement in articulating an alternative regionalist project must be complemented by its ability to direct its struggles over governance to the relevant authority figures. In this regard, institutionalized forums where civil society actors interact with authoritative actors can be helpful; these forums may be regarded as the institutional embodiment of participatory governance as well as an avenue through which CSO advocacy may be more effectively channelled. While such interactions do not always guarantee that officials will adopt CSO perspectives and solutions, and this is revealed by SAPA's inability to influence the final form of the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights, at the very least, the discursive space may be widened, which could over time lead to substantive change. To further facilitate the network's advocacy on ASEAN, which has its secretariat in Jakarta, SAPA's working group on ASEAN established in January 2009 a civil society office in central Jakarta named the ASEAN People's Centre, which is expected to 'develop into a regional hub' for civil society's advocacy on ASEAN matters (ThinkCentre 2009). However, these substantial advances in 'regionalism from below' have not been matched by official progress on participatory regionalism. Instead, ASEAN's governing elite have begun to employ discursive manipulations and have intruded into APF processes to limit official ASEAN movement on this front.

ASEAN and the Forum: participatory regionalism takes a back seat

Discursive manipulations have involved at least one 'high-level ASEAN official' publicly contesting civil society's notion of a 'people-centred' ASEAN in favour of the phrase, 'people-oriented' ASEAN (Chandra 2009: 9–11). The term 'people-oriented' is preferred by ASEAN officials and is documented in the ASEAN Charter in Article 1–13. Alexander Chandra, a prominent SAPA activist and presently Southeast Asian coordinator for the Trade Knowledge Network finds that the difference involves more than just semantics (Chandra 2009: 9–11). It can be interpreted as an ASEAN commitment to emphasize people's concerns and welfare when designing regional policies *without* necessarily integrating the region's people in policy consultations or decision-making. CSOs, in contrast, are demanding a 'people-centred' ASEAN that will embrace a more democratic decision-making structure in which the region's people – its stakeholders – are empowered, including through their involvement in deliberations on policies that ultimately affect their welfare. Discursive contestation over this particular terminology clearly involves officials and regional civil society attempting to impose distinct constructions of ASEAN that caters to their different interests. ASEAN, however, seems unlikely to institutionalize greater civil society participation in its internal deliberations and decision-making processes. The Charter, after all, clearly reflects ASEAN sentiments on this matter, having failed to create any institutional mechanism for civil society participation in ASEAN's consultative processes (ASEAN 2007g).

In light of these trends, the future of the interface between civil society representatives from the APF and ASEAN leaders remains in doubt. Member states such as Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Singapore are said to be unhappy with these interface sessions and have questioned the legitimacy and the mandate of civil society activists claiming to represent the region's people. Malaysia, the initiator of the first interface, has reportedly been criticized for failing to control CSO participation at that first session (Chongkittavorn 2009). The discomfort of regional governments with the interface prompted senior ASEAN officials in 2009 to decide that these interface sessions would be optional rather than a permanent fixture of ASEAN summits. Moreover, five out of the ten civil society representatives chosen by participants at the 5th ACSC/APF to represent them at the October 2009 interface session in Thailand were rejected by their respective governments – Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines and Singapore – while only the

moderator of the interface, a Thai academic, was allowed to speak, prompting representatives from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand to walk out of the interface meeting (APF 2009). The five individuals had been rejected because they had not been vetted as interface participants by ASEAN senior officials, who had, in fact, earlier approved five other persons more acceptable to the countries concerned (Interviewee #3, Singapore, August 2010).¹⁷ Even if one accepts that this episode involved a lapse in protocol on the part of civil society, the presence of the vetting process calls into question the official commitment to a genuinely participatory ASEAN.

To avoid a repeat of the contested 2009 interface, the Vietnam Organizing Committee (VOC) preparing for the 2010 Hanoi summit has outlined procedures and criteria for both the 6th APF/ACSC and the interface (APF 2010). More significantly, the VOC requires that APF participants and leaders will have to agree on both the civil society representatives to the interface and its agenda, effectively handing veto powers to leaders and national governments (APF 2010: 7). While this condition could arguably be justified as imparting order to what could be an unstructured affair, it nevertheless undermines regional civil society's freedom to manage its own representation, and to express itself openly to officials and leaders who seem intent on exercising control over who they deal with and the topics on which they are prepared to engage. The vetting process, it has been suggested, has been adopted to prevent CSO representatives with partisan (i.e. opposition) political affiliations from using the interface as a channel to air their political grievances to national leaders (Interviewee #2, Kuala Lumpur, June 2010; Interviewee #3, Singapore, August 2010). While leaders might be unhappy with the opposition affiliations or sentiments of those selected to act as civil society's representatives to interface sessions, the fact remains that if these individuals have been chosen by civil society participants at the APF *to represent them and the APF*, then those chosen should be recognized in this capacity by leaders and officials rather than in terms of their individual political leanings or acceptability to leaders.¹⁸ This is why a less controversial option would be to select individuals to represent issues rather than countries at the interface sessions, emphasizing discursive rather than country-based or demographic representation.

Conclusion: towards an Asian counter-hegemonic regionalism

This chapter has argued that despite a growing rhetorical commitment to engagement with regional civil society, at the practical level official ASEAN continues to resist civil society's call for its greater involvement in ASEAN processes of agenda setting, deliberation and decision-making. This does not mean that there is no engagement between ASEAN and regional civil society. Civil society participation has, however, been mostly confined to areas of functional utility to ASEAN, usually depoliticized to emphasize the technical expertise and grassroots familiarity of CSOs and local community groups, and therefore helpful when addressing issues such as rural development, HIV/AIDS, disaster relief, women's development and youth. In fact, ASEAN's preference, reflected in recent official documents and blueprints, appears to be for a civil society that will help it achieve the already established goals and projects of ASEAN's governing elite rather than a civil society that will – through genuine, two-way deliberations – help ASEAN set these goals and agendas in the first place. Notwithstanding these limitations, the APF is still a significant development in Asian regionalism for the following reasons.

As an initiative led by non-elite civil society groups, APF appears to represent a more authentic social forum compared to APA. However, whether this authenticity can be maintained is open to question. Although regional officials have not thus far intruded into CSO deliberations in the APF, their imposition of terms and conditions for civil society participation in the interface sessions with ASEAN leaders suggests that the move to participatory regionalism is not assured. Moreover,

how open and free the Forum is also depends on where it is hosted. With summit hosts usually providing partial funding for the APF/ACSC,¹⁹ there is scope for official interference in the Forum through setting criteria and conditions for participation and debate. Governments could even refuse to hold the Forum, which has yet to be formally institutionalized in the ASEAN Charter, although the ACSC is mentioned in official documents on the Socio-Cultural Community pillar (ASEAN 2009: 23).

Despite these problems, the APF offers one valuable site in which various expressions of resistance to mainstream regional governance from civil society are being consolidated into a more cohesive counter-hegemonic regional project that challenges core elements of the regionalism supported by official ASEAN. In particular, it is SAPA, a non-elite regional civil society network, that has provided a locus for harnessing the knowledge and voices of a variety of CSOs across Southeast Asia to articulate such an alternative regionalism. While SAPA appears to perform a role similar to that of ASEAN-ISIS in APA, SAPA is closer to the grassroots in ASEAN than ASEAN-ISIS. Indeed, SAPA and its leading members have helped to generate amongst regional CSOs a greater regional consciousness and a consensus on many key regional governance issues. In that sense, SAPA is becoming more representative of the region's peoples, which, in turn, renders the APF as the more authentic social forum even as the state tries to intrude into Forum affairs. These recent developments in regional civil society suggest that 'regionalism from below' in Southeast Asia will be a phenomenon that will gain in strength even as it faces obstacles from governments in the region.

The significance of the APF for wider Asian regionalism lies in the fact that it is part of a growing Asian-wide transnational web of networks and people's forums through which solidarity is being forged amongst civil society actors, and through which alternative regional projects are being articulated across Asia, specifically Southeast Asia, South Asia and Northeast Asia. SAPA is the central 'network actor' in this web of interactions, deliberations and consensus-building from which alternative regional governance frameworks are articulated and speak to the specific local conditions of different subregions. Each of these counter-regionalist projects shares a common framework, however, centred on rights, democratic governance, social justice and people participation. As a result, an increasingly coherent counter-regionalism is in the making across Asia.

Notes

- 1 For a list of member institutes, see the website of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS Malaysia), a founding member of ASEAN-ISIS, at www.isis.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=282&Itemid=127, accessed 10 August 2010.
- 2 The working group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism comprising academics and activists, established in 1996, has been actively lobbying ASEAN to adopt a human rights agenda. See Mohamad (2002).
- 3 See Dosch (2009) on the internal differences within ASEAN-ISIS.
- 4 I use the term 'elites' to refer to groups/networks such as ASEAN-ISIS and others routinely invited by officials to contribute to regional policy based on their scholarly/technical expertise.
- 5 The term CSOs is often used interchangeably with non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
- 6 Track-1 refers to inter-governmental interactions while track-2 interactions involve non-state actors, principally scholars, interacting with officials to provide input on regional problems. Although non-elite civil society members sometimes participate in track-2 deliberations, their locus of interaction on regional and other policy issues are referred to as track-3.
- 7 I adopt Alagappa's definition of 'civil society' as that social space between state and family but outside of the market in which people organize themselves using discourse and action to collectively influence the state and other authoritative actors, but 'whose activities are not motivated by profit' (Alagappa 2004: 9).

- 8 In this chapter, I use the term 'civil society' or CSOs to refer to the non-elite groups engaged primarily in advocacy on political, economic and social issues.
- 9 The role of ASEAN-ISIS in the genesis of APA is discussed in Caballero-Anthony (2006).
- 10 Neo-liberalism is a set of politico-economic ideas for governing economies and societies based on the self-regulating market. Core policies include liberalization, privatization and deregulation, all aimed at minimizing the state's role in the economy and unleashing efficiencies in allocation, production and distribution. Employment, social equity and social stability are not core goals of neo-liberal governance, while competitiveness and efficiency are. Even if there is substantial state intervention in markets, a neo-liberal regime may still be in place if states adopt its core goals for firms and the economy *and* seek to inculcate the population with the ethics of individual responsibility, initiative, hard work and self-reliance. See Lemke (2001).
- 11 While democratization in Thailand in the 1990s and in Indonesia following the fall of Suharto led to a sprouting of civil society activity in these previously authoritarian states, CSOs in other, less-than-democratic settings such as Vietnam and Myanmar were also registering an increase (Caballero-Anthony 2006). In these rather more inhospitable settings, CSOs found ways to negotiate with the state and to 'creatively adapt to their highly restrictive milieu' (Nesadurai 2010: 12). Many of these CSOs used the new communications technology to 'escape' repression and silencing, operating not only through cyberspace but also creating links to other CSOs, in turn, contributing to the growing vibrancy of regional civil society in Southeast Asia.
- 12 These setbacks are detailed in Caballero-Anthony (2006: 65–66).
- 13 Ramirez (2008: 6) outlines the series of events leading to the 1st ACSC.
- 14 The February forum was scheduled to coincide with the 14th ASEAN summit. Although the summit was aborted following internal unrest in the host country, Thailand, the Forum went ahead.
- 15 Author's interview with a Singapore-based scholar familiar with the work of the ASEAN-ISIS network, conducted in Singapore in August 2010.
- 16 Author's interview with a representative of the Philippine member of the ASEAN-ISIS network, conducted in Kuala Lumpur in June 2010.
- 17 Author's interview with a Singapore-based scholar of ASEAN, conducted in Singapore in August 2010.
- 18 Past ACSC/APF sessions have generated between 200 and 1,000 participants.
- 19 Funding also comes from regional CSOs and international foundations.