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Democracy is in retreat across Southeast Asia. Scholars and activists alike see few reasons to be positive about developments to come, given those conjunctures in individual states in the region, as well as in international political society, currently sidestep or contest liberal ideals and democratisation. In this chapter, we offer, however, a more positive spin. Taking *political space* as our point of departure, we argue that a wave of protest and activism that has swept across large parts of the Southeast Asian region over the past two decades has not only altered the composition of individual actors, but has also profoundly reshaped norms regarding who can participate in politics, when, how, and why. To paraphrase Merle Goldman (2005), people have gone from being subjects to becoming citizens. Democratic institutions may continue to degrade, even as democratic *actors* seek or create new avenues for empowerment and even influence, across Southeast Asia.

This chapter adapts (and draws heavily on) Hansson and Weiss (2018).

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The Thai Red Shirt movement offers a good example: as it emerged, this movement came to embody more than protest, to alter participants' perceptions of themselves, and others' understanding of them, as political animals (Buranajaroenkij et al., 2018; Hansson, 2012; Kitiarsa, 2012). Citizenship has extended online in the face of rising control and repressive measures on the ground, creating a floating discursive space between online and physical realities, cultivating new expressions of active citizenship. Southeast Asia in general has not seen a shrinking civil society concomitant with democratic backsliding or outright collapse, as many argue has been the case elsewhere. Civil society has rather expanded, becoming denser and more visible—although the balance of power within the virtual and physical space of civil society may tilt at times toward the advantage of autocrats and conservative forces, rather than democrats.

The space of informal politics—that is, civil society—in contemporary Southeast Asia is increasingly varied, changed most notably with the rise of online platforms that parallel and extend real-world platforms and struggles. Participation in the virtual world *is* meaningful, both for effecting political change and, perhaps more importantly, for shifting individuals' understanding of their own political capacity and position. Moreover, ordinary people and activists move seamlessly between these domains, rather than experiencing the virtual and physical as separate. In the process, political norms evolve at individual and collective levels. Approaching the potential of civil society from the perspective of political space helps to dissociate this sphere from, but also to situate it vis-à-vis, formal, institutional politics: the transforming and expanding space of civil society sustains the capacity for participation, empowerment, and normative shifts, even when structural or policy reform is unpropitious. Moreover, domestic political space, and particularly that in which, in the terms of this volume's editors, individuals and organisations "champion alternatives" to prevailing norms of state and market, is highly and perennially mutable, allowing ongoing adaptation and innovation.

Political Space as Point of Departure

Political space has ebbed and flowed globally throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since the 2010s in Southeast Asia, however, we have witnessed both an expansion of political space and intensified attempts at limiting activism. We envision political *space* as a metaphor for the act of political participation, or as a physical or discursive space in which political participation is possible. This definition implies that political space is delimited by boundaries that define what actors, interests, and ideas may gain access and which are excluded. A range of actors with sometimes conflicting interests and with varying power resources contest these boundaries. Some aim to expand political space; others aim to limit it—including in line with efforts to undermine democratic institutions in Southeast Asia—or else have that unintended effect.

In this chapter, we consider how social and political actors struggle to carve out space for their activism, directed at the state or striving to affect social norms and institutions. As we explore below, political space extends beyond, but encompasses the domain of civil society; it is on that portion of political space in Southeast Asia that we focus here. An understanding of how political space is produced and how it changes must not only analyse those actors who aim to expand space but also, and just as importantly, explore how political space is colonised and limited or its boundaries, guarded and policed, and by whom. Explicitly anti-democratic movements in several Southeast Asian countries in recent years, for instance, have paradoxically made use of and thrived in the same institutional and discursive space as activists struggling to establish or sustain liberalisation, including rights to organise, speak publicly, demonstrate, advocate, publicise, and assemble. It is not only the state that polices boundaries; forces intent on preventing certain interests, including pro-democratic forces, from sharing political space emerge from within civil society, as well, and sometimes in conjunction with the state.

Bourdieu's conception of the political field is instructive. He sees the political field as "a relatively autonomous arena of struggle with its own specific type of capital that has developed historically" (Swartz, 2003: 147). Embedded within the concept are both structural attributes—institutions and actors—and power relations. However, it is a struggle for power, both over symbolic power to define a particular social reality and more instrumental power over public policies and ideas able to generate collective mobilisation that most clearly characterises the field (Swartz, 2003: 147). The character of political space as well as the relative position of actors therein and in the broader class structure moulds the supply of and demand for political ideas. The generation of political options, as well as relevant boundaries and available meanings, must be considered in context, then, including with regard to the state, given its claim to symbolic power (Swartz, 2003: 148, 152).

Other scholars complicate our reading of political space, recognising its multi-dimensionality and the extent to which state and non-state actors mutually constitute the arena in which they engage. Collier and Collier (1991), for instance, trace discontinuities or critical junctures along the path by which movement politics shaped Latin American political regimes. "Fundamental political differences" in how regimes incorporated labour (Collier & Collier, 1991: 7)—as by replacing independent unions with state-penetrated ones, versus parties' mobilising unions as a convenient electoral base—shaped not only labour contention but the expansion or narrowing of political space broadly. In effect, these approaches also shaped democratic or authoritarian political regimes' possible trajectories. Valenzuela's (1989) focus on contests over "organisational space," particularly for and by labour as a critical strategic group in the course of installing or replacing authoritarianism, homes in on this same dialectic. Within Asia, Hewison and Rodan (1994) similarly link the rise and decline of the ideological Left—socialism and communism—to the fate of "non-state political space," and specifically civil society, during

key phases in Southeast Asia through the 1970s.[1] Since then, the vector has reversed: with other non-state groups' working to expand civil society, the Left now has new space in which to strategise. In other words, an array of organised actors interact within political space, their engagement and struggles for or around forms of power (not necessarily over the state), simultaneously situating that space and colouring its timbre and priorities.

Regardless, common parlance and prevailing ways of thinking about power and politics imply a dichotomous relationship between state and civil society, entailing both a degree of autonomy within and clear-cut boundaries among the Weberian spheres of political, economic, and civil society. Such habits have distracted attention from the way these spheres overlap and produce variations in opportunities for social and political actors to define and deploy political space. These conceptual boundaries are not helpful for an understanding of how and why political space is structured in certain ways in different contexts.

The trope of state versus civil society, however politically useful for activists in their struggle against authoritarian rule, has, in particular, produced a misleading conception of the nature of repression and delimitation of political space as purely a state affair. In reality, regime institutions and attributes need not be so defining. Contemporary developments in Southeast as well as East Asia, for instance, clearly suggest the importance of social movements and other civil societal actors in both the policing and delimitation of political space and, consequently, in shaping or reproducing authoritarian politics. And, as mentioned earlier, not just overt repression, but also non-democratic groups' and movements' more or less subtle occupation of political space, may serve to amplify the interests of the state or a dominant political party.[2]

We therefore deem it an empirical question of how and by whom political space is produced, reproduced, or delimited. Episodes of mobilisation within

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[1] The Cold War period was formative in this regard, when in most Southeast Asian countries the (broadly defined) "left" was located primarily in civil society, while political regimes were dominated by authoritarian, conservative governments staunchly opposing not only communism but also other transformative forces that could be suspected of harboring "socialist" ideas, or challenge authoritarian regimes. A link between the general ebb and flow of civil society and the fate of a more broadly defined left in Southeast Asia was thus established (Hansson et al., 2020; Weiss, 2020).

[2] An example are so-called "Red Flag associations" in Vietnam, which party-state-affiliated originations encourage to appear in public to protest against pro-rights protesters, or the appearance of angry, purportedly local mobs around homes of pro-democracy, environmental, or human rights activists elsewhere in the region. Such state alignments or encouragement can also be symbolic, such as when the Thai queen came out to show her support of the pro-monarchy "yellow shirts," at the height of their struggles against the pro-democracy "red shirts" in the streets of Bangkok. Thailand offers other examples, too. For instance, during the 2014 elections, yellow-shirt civil society groups blockaded roads, formed human barricades outside polling stations, and obstructed the delivery of ballot-boxes, preventing more than two million voters from casting ballots (Sinpeng, 2014), and in October 2020, a network of yellow shirts mobilised around the parliament compound in Bangkok to prevent pro-democracy supporters from gathering during a special parliamentary session to find a solution to the country's political crisis (*Bangkok Post*, 25 October 2020).

and across countries in Southeast Asia pose and embody both institutional and normative challenges to a topographical map of political space, engaging and transforming varying norms, authorities, ideas, and practices. Toward the end of theorising how and when norms and forms of political participation change, and with what implications, we start with concepts and terms.

Conceptualising Political Space and Participation

The term "political space" has come into vogue in recent years, among both policy-makers and scholars, for instance, in terms of ways to expand participatory frameworks in authoritarian regimes in the name of "good governance." Our reading extends beyond authority to make, apply, interpret, or enforce rules—a notion of collective governance—to a multi-dimensional arena for empowerment at the level of norms and ideas as well as policies or other instrumental objectives, and working with, against, or around fellow citizens as well as the state. As such, political space overlaps state, government, and civil society, and is integral to the political regimes writ large defining and defined by relations among these entities. We include in our frame engagement across modes and media, from street protests and rallies to elections and lobbying, to documentary film and graffiti, to petitions and press conferences.

Policy and academic discussions alike tend to conceptualise political space as an at least loosely demarcated realm in which societal actors influence policy decisions or affect the rules by which citizens can participate in politics. In democratic regimes, this space is often presumed "independent": an arena in which unconstrained articulation of ideas and contestation over interests can occur and where state authorities cannot arbitrarily control, inhibit, or repress such activity. Even in democratic regimes, however, this view simplifies and idealises how political participation works and exaggerates the extent to which rights to participate in formal politics can be substantially guaranteed and utilised.

As Rueschemeyer (2004) has argued, the distribution of social and economic power resources profoundly affects the way citizens and groups can make use of their rights and their capacity to assert influence. Moreover, political influence itself may be more or less direct, and actors' claims may target either society broadly or a narrower political society. Some distance between the ideal and the reality of political equality seems inevitable, though the extent of that gap varies over time and place. In non-democratic regimes, not just asymmetric power resources but also repression of independent voices and claims limit the possibilities for marginalised groups' and individuals' influence. In authoritarian regimes, states strive to control and manipulate political space to their own advantage. Partly in consequence, social movements and other civil societal actors are likely to find themselves at odds with the political regime sooner or later, even when their initial claims were not transgressive or directed at the government as such. Struggles among social actors with conflicting claims are then likely to verge into struggles over the boundaries of

political space and, thus, over the composition of the political regime itself—as we see recurrently across Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asian states, outright authoritarian or otherwise, have used different measures to limit political space, including co-optation, politicisation of the judiciary, legal restrictions (including internal security laws), control of media and censorship, and manipulation of ethic and communal politics (Hewison, 1999: 232–233). The increasing salience of social media for mobilisation lends primacy to attempts at controlling and manipulating social media forums and communications specifically, to curtail activism. Those efforts alone extend from the juridical—introducing specific internet security laws and policing, to prohibit online discussion of certain themes—to shrewder tactics, such as employing armies of "influencers" to offer pro-government comments or attack potentially threatening opinions and efforts at mobilisation through online forums. In Vietnam, for instance, the party-state's army has admitted to employing personnel to patrol the internet and search social media platforms for non-accepted views, such as support of multipartyism or democratisation, civil society, criticism of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), exposure of corruption among high-level VCP officials and leaders, or criticism of the VCP's dependence upon China and the Chinese Communist Party. Official media reported that this "Force 47" ("*Lực lượng 47*"), established in early 2016, had expanded to more than 10,000 people within two years (*Tuổi* Trẻ, 2017). The Thai military junta also developed internet-policing institutions and efforts to monitor, influence, and control citizens since the 2006 military coup d'état—albeit focused not on protecting an incumbent political party, but on shielding the monarchy and military-dominated government from criticism (ICJ, 2021; McDermott, 2021). After the 2014 coup d'état, online and offline tactics combined to suppress anti-coup and pro-democracy groups and sentiments (Laungaramsri, 2016). Pro-democracy activists were arrested and the army regularly summoned academics and journalists for so-called "attitude adjustment" sessions regarding their online and offline writings and activities (personal communication with author).

Indeed, a majority of countries in the region have introduced new laws to restrict civil society and political space just in the past ten or so years. Some countries have pioneered or adapted legislation to facilitate courts' limiting expression in civil society and wider political space, such as the Cambodian government's Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO), passed in 2015. This enactment has helped Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party to bring about de facto single-party rule. The new law automatically criminalises civil society groups and organisations that fail to register with the state (Curley, 2018). Successive Thai military governments have adopted similar strategies, most recently with suggestions for a new, more controlling law governing non-governmental organisations. Singapore, too, has long since enacted and enforced laws covering civil society, while in Vietnam, the development of a law on associations has been debated since the mid-1990s; due to its sensitivity, it has been postponed numerous

times. Restrictions can therefore be enforced by decrees and other regulations (Hansson, 2023) leaving maximum space for interpretation by the ruling regime (see Sidel & Moore, 2019 for a regional overview).

Yet these laws notwithstanding, the rise of social media as a part of political space exemplifies how malleable that space is. When political space expands, it becomes part of the opportunity structure for different forms of activism, movements, and organisations—but it also constitutes part of the terrain on which struggles for influence and to exercise power happen, vis-à-vis both governments and fellow claimants. Changes in political space are incremental and cumulative, meaning the salience of social media as the latest effort at space-reclamation is relative to what came before.

The current transformation of political space is not possible to understand without taking note of the broader societal changes that have occurred in most Southeast Asian countries in recent decades. Massive socio-economic transformations have, for example, resulted in the emergence of new cleavages in society, producing new social and political conflicts and actors. Those actors engage in claiming, defining, utilising, and imagining political space. Importantly, whereas Weber sketches discrete realms of civil and political society, for us, these arenas inhabit a shared political plane and terrain. Their institutions may be separate, but agency, discourses, ideas, and norms flow across this arena. Contributing to the formation of political space are representatives of political society, economic society, and civil society, indicating that the state and formal institutions in political society, and the organisations that populate civil society, may have less reciprocal autonomy than analysts often presume.

While the state can be instrumental in shaping political space and allowing it to flourish, by protecting its sanctity via laws and regulations, political space extends beyond formal politics (or Weber's political society) and cannot be established by state intervention alone. Rather, its creation depends on "the organisational practices and political experiences of the different social groups, and it involves discourses and ideas concerning rights and responsibilities present at different societal and institutional levels" (Webster & Engberg-Pedersen, 2002: 10). We extend beyond what Webster and Engberg-Pedersen suggest, by emphasising that political space is not merely a "governance space," in which societal actors come into contact with state and government institutions and are thus able to influence policy, but also where ideas about inclusion or exclusion, and about participation and representation, are contested. As such, one might expect that the structuration of political space would be tightly connected with regime type—an issue to which we return below.

So what are we left with: in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, where do we find political space, and how might one participate within it? At the most basic level, we might identify the various structures through which individuals express claims on state institutions, government officials, and society, from elections to protest actions. All these activities transpire within political space, as we understand it, and all represent political participation. Our

focus on *space* rather than on specific structures lets us sidestep some of the pitfalls of the liberal state–civil society argument, including rigid categorisations based on the type of actor, target, or demand, not least since a given individual may participate simultaneously across multiple registers and modes. Rather, our approach allows for a wider conception of political participation, beyond procedural and formal definitions of participation centred around the transfer of political authority from citizens to officials through elections, and as exercised by both formal and informal actors.

Inspired by advances in civil society and social movement theories, we think there are good reasons to think of political space in relational terms, and not to offer an a priori argument of how it is constituted or changed. Political space emerges within, between, and outside formal political society; how civil society relates to the state colours some segments, but affects others less. A dichotomising approach to civil society and state is, therefore, not particularly useful for understanding how and why political space emerges, expands, or contracts. Neither is it helpful to view the state as necessarily superior, across dimensions, given how much more overlap we see among economic, political, and civil society in any given regime, and the different types of authority and empowerment possible (Cohen & Arato, 1994; Howard, 2004).

But power still matters, especially absent meaningful democracy or political liberalisation—as applies to much of Southeast Asia—which tends to render political space more independent. Political space may be exclusive and exclusionary. State actors may seek to push out or suppress dissidents, or the valences may be more subtle. For instance, the "NGOisation" of civil society, effectively an externality of neoliberal development in which states devolve service delivery to NGO partners, "marks a shift from rather loosely organised, horizontally dispersed, and broadly mobilising social movements to more professionalised, vertically structured NGOs. This shift not only has lasting effects for mission, goals, management, and discourse cultures of civic actors but it also influences advocacy strategies, and ultimately the properties of the public that NGOs seek out or try to generate" (Lang, 2013: 62). Such an emphasis on supposedly non-ideological managerialism, under which political decisions are matters of technocratic processes rather than expressions of specific interests, forms an ideology in itself, and implicitly disregards or suppresses other forms of knowledge, engagement, and, importantly, norms: only certain strands within civil society then enjoy full legitimacy (though they may still contest that diminution, their challenge oriented either toward fellow activists or toward the state).

Importantly, political space—and political participation—has a discursive aspect. The concept of a *public sphere* effectively captures these specifically discursive dimensions, even if not all political space need be so public, civil, or interactive as the Habermasian (1974) ideal implies. Not all activity in the public sphere is clearly instrumentalist or structurally pitched, nor does all engage explicitly with questions of power or authority, let alone with the state specifically. Even so, changes in meaning and interpretation, developed

through challenges to symbolic rather than policymaking power, shift the ground on which political regimes rest—a firmament no more inevitable or immune to change than the ranks of office-holders.

Toward a Synthesis

Approached differently, we bring together here two strands within the political and sociological literature that have developed more in parallel than in dialogue: studies of social movements and of civil society. While scholars of both purport to explore cognate phenomena, in practice, the foci of literatures on "activism" or "protest" versus "non-institutional politics" or "NGOs," and their respective understandings of where ideology derives from or intervenes, vary, resulting in a misleadingly fractured view of how the pieces fit together. Our target is the nexus of associational life,[3] whether "formal" or "informal," and norms, and thus resists dichotomies (*civil* versus *political*, or *institutional* versus *non-institutional*) as well as clear boundaries. Perhaps most importantly, this space is neither static nor placid; especially in politically tense Southeast Asia, it is a realm of struggle and competition.

Indeed, neither state nor non-state space is stable: both are consistently sites of contestation and change. However, changes in one realm need not be tied to changes in the other; a temporal lag might intercede, or shifts in, for instance, state institutions may not translate at all, or at all rapidly, to changes in behaviour within civil society. Moreover, when changes do occur, these may not be experienced in the same way across political space.

In particular, political space includes both *formal* and *informal* avenues for participation. Scholarly work on mobilisation and political engagement tends to speak in terms of formal politics or institutions—political parties, bureaucratic agencies, etc.—rather than informal avenues or non-institutional politics (Offe, 1985). This semantic distinction is useful, but should not be overstated. Associational life, media, alliances, and more may mix formal organisation with non-institutional channels (or vice-versa), for instance, or may vacillate between forms and targets. Moreover, institutions may have influence, yet not convey empowerment; organisations *for*, but not *of*, the poor, for instance, might effectively pursue policy goals, yet leave their constituents as politically marginalised as ever. Political space includes a plethora of arenas and avenues for participation, including outside what we understand as "state" and organised "civil society."

Formal space may face specific curbs or controls, but also offers certain protections; the balance between these features varies across and within regimes. Informal space may offer more flexibility for innovation and inclusion but may be marginalised and/or especially vulnerable to suppression.

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[3] Especially where association is legally difficult, participation may well be more atomised—but we are more concerned with collective than individual action, not least given the necessarily shared quality of norms.

Meanwhile, not all political activity, including much that is more expressive than instrumental in orientation, transpires in *public* space; some political participation or activism is essentially private.

We offer four key caveats in presenting this synthesis of a political space to be grasped *in toto*. First, it is not just the state that demarcates non-state space—to put it in more conventional terms, we argue that activists may claim, and not just receive, space for civil society. In the same vein, power relations within political space are not limited to those between citizens and state. Second, these political spaces are multi-levelled: that aspect is most clear in terms of institutions (village-level compared with national politics, for instance), but applies also to less clearly structured spaces. Third, a given actor's choice of venue or channel is not entirely free: participation outside state space may indicate mistrust and disenchantment; it might reflect strategic decisions or forcible exclusion; or it might reflect a lack of resources, confidence, or information to move from social activism to electoral politics or vice-versa.

Lastly, we must consider also the level of the actor: not only who participates and how, but how actors' sense of agency and disposition changes, or how they create themselves or are created, through political participation. We might think of constituting collective actors—"identisation," in Melucci's (1995) terms—but also acknowledge shifts in attitudes, empowerment, and expectations at the individual level, regardless of whether participation seeks to change, or succeeds in changing, policies.

All told, taking political space as our point of departure allows us to develop an analytical framework and define concepts able to capture changing norms for, and complex realities of, political participation in Southeast Asia. Within this frame, we see the effects of regime type, how we might best characterise civil society, how political space has changed or is changing, and the implications of these shifts for political praxis and both policy and ideological outcomes across the region. Most importantly, we see that within the space of civil society, individuals may develop not just participatory habits, but also new norms of who is entitled or encouraged to exercise voice, changing how we should evaluate the reach and normative authority of Southeast Asia's illiberal(ising) regimes.

Political Participation in a Post-democratic Context

Political science tends to characterise and categorise regimes in terms of the extent to which they meet the criteria for liberal democracy, situating them on a continuum from what Dahl terms polyarchy (1971) to totalitarianism. Even so, common parlance favours a simple democratic/authoritarian binary, even while acknowledging a raft of hybrid "semi" types or "democracies with adjectives" (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Diamond, 2002). Such framings assume power and authority reside largely with the state, or are at least the state's to distribute. Moreover, being defined at the national level, these typologies

assume a degree of homogeneity: a state is or is not "democratic" or "authoritarian," presumably with a degree of stickiness or stasis to that categorisation. We challenge these assumptions in two key ways.

First, we start from the premise that authority is distributed unevenly through the state in terms of geography, peoples, and issues. That unevenness sculpts the landscape for resistance or challenge—for instance, whether citizens experience the state only as coercive military, as developmentalist benefactors, or as largely absent. Indonesians or Filipinos today experience, for instance, what observers classify as democratic regression in their polities in very different ways: only some may feel increasingly disempowered, constrained, or at risk of repressive action. At the same time, the specific character of that state also shapes the challenges it faces, whether we think in terms of stores of despotic versus infrastructural power (Mann, 2008) or more broadly in terms of the state's capacity, ideological premises, allies, and policy priorities.

Second, voices from "economic society"—and specifically, large-scale, usually multinational corporations and/or domestic oligarchs—carry special resonance in a hegemonically neoliberal world. Business interests, not just those of states, shape policy and discourse around domestic political issues. Hewison (2018), for example, argues that the state in Southeast Asia has been "businessified," such that it now represents an increasingly opaque and hostile ground for ordinary people's activism and political participation. This development has touched not only democratic states. Rather, all regime types edge toward a political order characterised by the dimension of corporate influence in a "post-democratic" order.

Colin Crouch first proposed this notion of post-democracy, referring then specifically to democracies. He explained that under post-democracy:

> while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them. Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests. (Crouch, 2004: 4)

Few states in Southeast Asia are democracies, however loosely defined. But even clearly illiberal contemporary states tend to hold elections—and more important for our purposes, the sort of behind-the-scenes negotiations Crouch describes matter across systems. With Hewison, we stress, too, that civil society is not immune, but has been similarly affected by neoliberal norms of managerialism and technocratic ideas rather than popular participation and inclusion. That said, citizens under post-democracy, whatever the prevailing institutional regime, need not be "passive, quiescent, even apathetic," in Crouch's terms

(2004: 4)—but their interventions may take novel forms or may be directed at targets other than the state proper. Moreover, those forms reflect not only varied but changing norms: adaptations within civil society as corporate interests have enhanced their sway throughout Southeast Asia, for instance, have pressed activists to create and claim new niches and justifications with which to press new claims—from pressing legal cases for land claims to Facebook groups centred on labour rights.

Clearly, the state still matters. However unstable, we must understand the state as comprising institutions, actors, and ideas. Those institutions constitute the terrain of "formal" politics, whether electoral or otherwise; their boundaries demarcate state versus non-state space. At the levels of actors and ideas, the limits of the state are far less clear.

Further, an analysis of political space necessitates clear analytical distinctions between abstractions such as "states," "governments," and "political regimes." Distinguishing among these entities helps us to differentiate among forms and targets of activism. Challenges posed by actors who aim to expand political space may, for instance, be "anti-government"—challenging incumbent leaders—without necessarily being "anti-regime" or "anti-state." Likewise, groups and individuals who seek regime change or reproduction may be less interested in the state, in terms of specific institutions. Of course, in some instances, for example, in single-party or dominant-party regimes, the state and a particular government or party may intertwine so closely, in ideational as well as institutional terms, that a distinction becomes less meaningful. In other words, such distinctions clarify the differences among challenges to people, to structures, and to underlying norms and ideologies, thus helping to make sense of the forces that contribute to struggles over the borders of political space.

Moreover, the state or a specific government may have, essentially, avatars in civil society: actors or organisations that embody the same ideas about governance as the state but are not themselves part of that institutional infrastructure. The overlapping of political, economic, and sociocultural elites in Southeast Asia makes this intertwining especially salient. State agents or allies may work across zones; ideas and norms, too, may permeate state and non-state space, whether state-supporting or -opposing. The state contends not only with citizens as social activists and enforcers of accountability, but also with corporate, fellow-state, and other interests. The contemporary terrain of pluralism includes widely disparate structures and voices, in mutable combinations, only sometimes targeting state institutions. We might then think of stores of capital such engagement generates—political, social, and cultural—each also fostering attendant axes of inequality. What forms of participation appear promising or possible, then, varies not only with regime type but also with the claimant's position vis-à-vis that regime and its power-holders, the nature and target of the claim, and the resources available (material, intellectual, temporal, human) and opposition or allies likely.

Expanding and Contesting Political Space

Enabling this variability is an increasingly broad field for politics, with not only the expansion of consultative mechanisms, however shallow, in the name of "good governance" as well as more genuine opening of policy channels but also the development of new media platforms and online space. A state such as Singapore may carefully design and calibrate deliberative fora, for instance, recognising the value of collecting popular input into policies and priorities, only to see far more free-wheeling, sometimes satirical or cynical, discussion generate online (Tan, 2018: 45–46). Governments, states, and civil societies struggle to define and dominate different portions of the political terrain, while commercial forces, including the omnipresent nudge of consumerism, likewise angle their way into the fray. Any notion of a clear division between state and civil society becomes blurred when we take political space rather than the state as our starting point; doing so shifts the emphasis away from regime institutions and attributes as necessarily defining and indicates both cooperation and conflict in these relations and the production of political space.

Not all political space is "new," of course, let alone oblivious to the boundaries of the state. The usual organisational suspects still populate civil society, engaging the state in the name of the usual pro-democratic goals. As Southeast Asian states themselves navigate transitions not only to democracy but among democratically elected governments, though, the ground shifts for civil society. We see that how much and how civil society organisations engage vary even across and within democracies. Overarching these contests are still economic interests, which limit both sides' range of movement, yet the foundational structures and modes involved are those of classical democratic theory, in which state and social forces present themselves as distinct, sometimes antagonistic, and iteratively mutually responsive.

Still, contemporary scholars focus heavily on the less tidily conceptualised terrain of the internet and social media as virtual political space. The least apocryphal among them tend to conceptualise an online public sphere as comparatively resistant to control and open to a range of players (Abbott, 2011; Esarey & Xiao, 2008), although the past decade has seen rising concern also for "digital authoritarianism" in Southeast Asia, or the ways undemocratic states have come to control and/or themselves exploit online political space (Sinpeng, 2019). Clearly, that sphere is itself fraught, marked by complex alignments and equally available to state as non-state actors, but should be considered in tandem with complementary and contesting social forces. Online participation raises awareness and provides access to information, may extend opportunities for would-be activists to learn from others, and may offer new modes of developing and presenting public responses to or claims upon authorities (government or otherwise). Such voice, though, need not take on

organisational form—and may simultaneously serve those authorities themselves, whether for information-gathering or for self-promoting propaganda (George, 2006; Rodan, 2003).

Part of what makes online media messy to study as grounds for political contest is the "digital divide," or the extent to which only some parts of the population—disproportionately urban, wealthier, better-educated citizens—presumably enjoy regular access to the internet. Critics have long levelled the same critiques at non-governmental organisations, citing the readier access of the urban middle classes to such vehicles. In fact, it may be that the range of media platforms prominent in the region, including not just social media, but also local traditional media, the deeper penetration of foreign media, and tools such as documentary film, effectively level the playing field and expand the range of audiences and modalities for voice. These modalities and arenas offer opportunities to destabilise the status quo and worry political leaders, across the digital divide.

Moreover, media present only one hazily institutionalised platform for political expression. Consumerist behaviour, for instance—all the more salient as Southeast Asian societies grow both more prosperous and more socioeconomically unequal (Huang & Wan, 2019)—too, may encode or advance political priorities (Hew, 2018). Such a reading calls into question not just the spaces in which politics happens, but what actually constitutes political activity: if a core objective is to reshape behaviour and pursuit of a political vision, when is that via policy change and when via more direct intervention? The inherent politicisation of even basic consumer activities complicates the relationship between politics and markets and allows progress toward political goals, not just in terms of policy influence. Situating media and consumer activity as politicised draws attention to discourse as political. Such attention illuminates how much a part of politics *interpretation* is, extending beyond, for instance, divergent readings of the same events in foreign versus domestic media.

However much empowerment such innovation confers or reflects, just as disparities of power and access pervade the public sphere, discourses, and norms, too, embody inequalities. We can see this reality, for instance, in changing norms of (un)equal citizenship and entitlement to voice across religious communities in Malaysia, as activism ramps up both online and offline around questions of Islam and Muslim privilege (Moustafa, 2018). Most importantly, not all ideas achieve or even seek power beyond their originators. Some ideas gain transformative, pervasive force, while others are more purely expressive or identity-group-specific, and some mix norms freely while others seek hegemony: to push out or police discordant voices. Indeed, however much we might adjust our lens to take in the panoply of political space, to focus on *space* acknowledges boundaries; these boundaries may shift but are still guarded and policed.

Bounding and Policing Political Space

While the state does set and enforce rules and regulations for participation, it is not just the state that monitors, regulates, and suppresses interests or voices within the political space. Rather, economic pressures, as well as individuals and groups from within civil society, likewise challenge fellow citizens' or interests' legitimacy, access, or priority. We thus need to look beyond formal, structural curbs and openings as Southeast Asian regimes take on features and forms; even new authoritarian controls filter through and among informal political actors and organisations—which is not to say that constraints emerge watered-down. Indeed, to some extent, we have seen a privatisation of policing; it is not merely that political space is not "neutral," but also that the power relations at play extend beyond those between citizens and state. In states across the region, we see civil society actors who engage directly in repressing others' agency in political space, including with the intent to delimit pro-democratic expressions. Even when the terrain of political space is largely discursive, moreover, both state and civil society policing of it may take on nonviolent as well as more violent forms. Online public space perhaps best exemplifies this wide dissemination of surveillance and control functions, if only since intercession is comparatively public. Thailand's aforementioned "yellow shirts" perhaps best embody this emerging, important possibility (Sinpeng, 2021). Yet censorship not just in this extreme case but generally—of speech or of political acts, online or offline—rests on more than norms and subtle pressure that may otherwise encourage self-restraint or conformity. Rather, states and social actors use their authority or more contingent opportunities to patrol and sanction those who push the boundaries these dominant forces themselves set.

Such devolution of authority, however organic or inadvertent, calls into question the resources non-state actors access to police or press the state or fellow citizens. Complex framing contests emerge (Benford & Snow, 2000: 626), both to limit the space of "acceptable" discourse and to expand those boundaries. In such ways, citizens and groups of citizens engage in contests over definitions of representation and democracy, challenging liberal presumptions by mobilising both for and against dictatorship, and developing novel forms of subversion, surveillance, and suppression independent of that contested state. The most obvious example is perhaps Thailand, where diverging views on the meaning of democracy rest on a battery of divergent norms and ideas about who is to be included in the demos, and whether legitimacy is based on popular participation in democratic elections or on an idea of a predefined morality embodied in the rulers (Chua, 2018). In single-party regimes such as Vietnam's, the larger discourse the ruling party propagates revolves around the party's historical right and mission to rule, and its leadership in the shadow of a distant future realisation of socialism. Online media have played a decisive role in shaping public contestation on social and political issues, especially among the vast array of social media users, ranging

from party-state agents or allies, to independent analysts and commentators, to concerned citizens (Thiem, 2018). In both cases, competing norms on political participation take shape and gain traction in the interplay among actors involved in these framing contests, in which the simple act of participating may in itself challenge norms. In such contexts, too narrow an understanding of what is "political" or who has what power would miss struggles not just between civil society and the state, but also within civil society itself, and would consequently miss important clues to an understanding of political regime change or reproduction.

For that matter, not only is the state itself beholden to or curbed by its ready reliance on business, but, as we touch on above, economic power also wields complex control. The liminal spaces of the modern economy are illustrative: both the precarity of migrant or floating, informal labour (Schierup et al., 2015) and the increasingly common status of refugees: beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance, yet profoundly disabled by that status. The fraught political economy of "aid" is notable, and especially germane to Southeast Asia. However life-saving, aid may also serve to dehumanise or deny the political agency of its beneficiaries; as Olivius (2018) proposes, in examining refugees from Myanmar, donors effectively seek to delimit "citizenship," in the sense of a claim to political participation.

That the state holds no monopoly on authoritative action or norm-setting suggests the limitations of too stark a distinction between state and civil society, as well as the potential for movement among political spaces: formal, informal, public, and private. Even so, the state is hardly disempowered; it, too, asserts its interests, as a corporate actor or set of self-interested component parts. Moments of (attempted or actual) regime transition—fitfully and perhaps only temporarily, but at least peacefully, as in Malaysia in 2018, or cataclysmically and more decisively, as in Myanmar in 2021—offer insight not just into when and how it matters, in terms of political space, whether a regime is "democratic" or "authoritarian" but also when and how political space changes.

Conclusion

Colin Crouch asserts, "Democracy thrives when there are major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people actively to participate, through discussion and autonomous organisations, in shaping the agenda of public life, and when they are actively using these opportunities" (Crouch, 2004: 2). That claim has merit, but is too narrow: we argue that non-democracies, too, benefit from meaningful participation—but that the domain of empowerment extends beyond the ability to shape policy agendas. A focus on political space as a varied, mercurial, organic terrain calls into question how much a label like "democracy" or "authoritarianism" tells us about the distribution in practice of empowerment, voice, and influence, particularly given neoliberalism's regime-blind spread. Especially when it comes to the norms legitimating and

motivating participation in Southeast Asia, we find regime type far from decisive; what happens within the political space of civil society, too, significantly complicates any too-pat conclusions that the norms that the formal/state portion of political space disseminates should or do trump those emerging from other corners.

Focusing on Southeast Asia in exploring these dimensions offers the opportunity to see not only a wide array of regime and state forms and capacities but also the development of and activity within a full range of political spaces, by a panoply of actors. Moreover, the dynamism within political space in this region allows insight not possible from observing more stable regime types or where consolidated, established institutions, actors, or ideas more consistently dominate. We might seek out patterns across cases—in the character and use of political space across regime types, in the constitution of civil society, and in the topography of political space—as we seek to refine our understanding of norms and how they evolve in the region. Yet, by unsettling concepts and conventions, and by homing in on the norms that undergird participation rather than the structures that aim to channel it, our perspective lays bare how ever-mutable and complex the relationships among state, regime, civil society, and citizens truly are.

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