

***ASEAN's Engagement of Civil Society: Regulating Dissent.* By Kelly Gerard. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Hardback: 196pp.**

As ASEAN moves towards the goal of an ASEAN Community by 2015, civil society engagement has become more important for the organization, along with the need to mobilize mass support to legitimate its initiatives. This has resulted in the promotion of the idea of a *people-oriented* ASEAN. Yet civil society remains skeptical of this idea and has called on ASEAN to transform itself into an organization that puts the interests of Southeast Asians at the heart of its decision-making processes. This tension has attracted the attention of some scholars, though there has been no critical study examining the “unhappy marriage” between ASEAN and civil society. Kelly Gerard’s admirable book represents an attempt to fill this gap. The book explores why ASEAN’s policy on civil society participation in its decision-making process has taken place and how ASEAN engages Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). More importantly, it is also an effort to provide an explanation of how underlying social conflicts have shaped the boundaries of civil society participation in governance institutions, determined which CSOs contribute to policy-making and the nature of their participation.

The main strength of *ASEAN's Engagement of Civil Society* is the author’s theoretical framework which skillfully frames her analysis throughout the book. The author deploys critical political economy to reveal how the nature of civil society engagement with ASEAN has been shaped in the context of larger conflicts over power and its distribution, and dominated by specific interests and alliances that have changed over time. More precisely, the author employs the political economy framework of Jayasuriya and Rodan (see Kanishka Jayasuriya and Garry Rodan, “Beyond Hybrid Regime: More Participation, Less Contestation in Southeast Asia”, *Democratization* 14, no. 5 (December 2007): 773–94, where modes of participation serve as the unit of analysis. In this view, institutional structures and ideologies have important roles to play in determining the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups in the political process. In other words, this approach addresses “the question of who is represented”, what “forms of participation are deemed permissible”, as well as what struggles have occurred to establish political spaces and “whose interests are furthered by their creation”. At the same time, these modes of participation are

employed to regulate conflicts by choosing which conflicts can be mediated or marginalized.

Indeed, Gerard's book is an important resource for civil society activists, due to the fact that it is very difficult to bring up sensitive issues such as human rights and fair trade within ASEAN because of their positioning beyond the mainstream perspectives. Even though there are some principal differences between them, for the last seventeen years civil society activists have engaged with ASEAN using different strategies and tactics. These have included cooperating with its officials, confrontation and engagement as a partner. Nevertheless, all these endeavours have resulted in increasing disappointment among CSOs. From the perspective of CSOs, ASEAN remains exclusive and its decision-making processes continue to be dominated by state elites who prioritize their own interests. Gerard's book provides a substantial intellectual tool with which CSOs can comprehend why their engagement has failed to transform ASEAN. As the author argues, it is because civil society engagement has been driven and shaped by ASEAN's needs to gain support of wider constituencies in endorsing its narrow reform agenda. Thus, there has been no objective at all to provide room for CSOs to contest the ASEAN political project.

In addition, by deploying critical political economy, the author points out that "the mode in which ASEAN actually interacts with CSOs constrains them in various important ways: CSOs are forced to either accommodate ASEAN's political project in order to interact with officials, or they are excluded from such interaction via the withdrawal of official participation, ignorance or even sabotage" (p. 7). It is clear that these modes of participation, on the one hand, aim to include non-state actors that can advance ASEAN's market-building programme, yet on the other hand, control dissenters who have become increasingly active in recent years. In other words, ASEAN engages CSOs only half-heartedly. Gerard's book suggests that it is time for civil society activists to re-evaluate their engagement with ASEAN and formulate new strategies and tactics by relating these to larger conflicts over power in the region. By doing so, activists can ensure that every effort has been made to force ASEAN to prioritize the demands of people in the region.

The overall structure of this book is cohesive and possesses a logical flow of ideas to allow chapters to connect seamlessly with each other to form a unified whole. Moreover, *ASEAN's Engagement of Civil Society* is clearly written, making it easy to follow the

argument and analysis of the author. Scholars and civil society activists who pay special attention to ASEAN would be well-advised to read Gerard's original and timely contribution.

YANTI MUCHTAR, Indonesian Feminist and civil society activist, is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, Western Australia; email: D.Muchtar@murdoch.edu.au.