

BOOK REVIEWS

Civil Society Elites: Field Studies from Cambodia and Indonesia.
Edited by Astrid Norén-Nilsson, Amalinda Savirani and Anders Uhlin. Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2023. Softcover: 256pp.

The theoretical literature on civil society has evolved as rapidly in recent years as the domestic politics of Southeast Asian states. Understandings of the role, motivations and goals of civil society actors have now moved well beyond the Tocquevillian paradigm—of civil society being “a defence against the oppressive state” (p. 6)—that dominated foreign aid policy and nation-building efforts in the post-Cold War era. Nowadays, civil society is seen in much broader terms. According to Astrid Norén-Nilsson, Amalinda Savirani and Anders Uhlin, it is

... best understood in generic terms as political space. It is a collectively organised but informal political sphere of society in which non-state actors seek to influence politics from outside political parties. It can be analytically distinguished from the state, party politics and the market economy; but in practice, boundaries between the different social spheres tend to be blurred (p. 6).

Blurred, too, by the growing political divides between Southeast Asian states, between those that have moved (albeit in fits and starts) towards the consolidation of liberal democracy and those that have headed straight down the path of authoritarianism. Indonesia and Cambodia, the subjects of this collected volume, sit at slightly different ends of this developmental distribution. Whereas Indonesia “has experienced expanded political space for civil society” since the downfall of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998, “although with a more recent trend of democratic regression”, Cambodia “has

experienced increasingly shrinking space for civil society activism, especially since around 2015” (p. 4).

The main focus of this edited volume is how power inequalities have developed within civil society in both Southeast Asia states because of the rise of an “elite” within that community. One reason, among many, is foreign funding. “Well-connected civil society actors with easy access to funding bodies and capacity to manage foreign grants” receive much of the available funding, particularly from abroad (p. 9). Moreover, in contrast with those who continue to view civil society as De Tocqueville did in the nineteenth century, the contributors to *Civil Society Elites* contend that civil society organizations (CSOs) are often far from separate from the state (especially in Cambodia), and many replicate the political and economic power dynamics found elsewhere in society. However, the contributors tend to avoid asserting whether the “elitisation” of civil society is a positive or negative phenomenon. In their concluding chapter, the editors argue that increased inequality within this sphere could threaten “popular representation” or be seen as “unavoidable”. However, some might also view it as a “desirable” outcome since “elite activists can influence politics in positive directions” (p. 253).

Following an Introduction, the first section of this collected volume begins with another introductory-like chapter by the editors, followed by specific chapters on the history of civil society in Cambodia and Indonesia. (Two of the chapters on Cambodia are written anonymously.) Part Two (“Elite Formation in Civil Society”) employs a similar structure—a broad theoretical chapter followed by empirical chapters on Cambodia and Indonesia, each exploring how elites have developed within particular areas of civil society. Perhaps the most interesting section of this volume is the third, which looks at how civil society elites interact with political or economic elites. Of significant interest, including to Cambodia scholars in light of the 2023 national elections, is this section’s discussion of “boundary crossing”, which refers to the interaction and circulation of elites within civil society and the public sector and politics. The chapters in this section track the career paths of several Cambodian and Indonesian civil society leaders who went on to work in the state or private sector. Supporting the theoretical framework, these cases demonstrate the causal weight of the accumulation of social and knowledge capital by civil society elites rather than often oversimplified narratives that governments or big businesses simply co-opt them.

Methodologically, the editors recognized that a structured, focused comparison of the entire populations of Indonesia or Cambodia, or even a representative sample of all their civil society actors, was not feasible. Instead, they utilize aspects of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "field", "capital" and "habitus" and then apply these "thinking tools" (p. 27) in the contributors' respective examinations of a diverse range of civil society elites. However, the role of "habitus"—loosely defined as a learned set of ideas by which someone orients themselves in society—is relatively underdeveloped and underutilized despite the number of interviews conducted with civil society elites. Readers seeking a microfoundational approach—examining individual interests and decision points—may find this volume somewhat lacking.

The contributors could also have offered more evidence to support their claims that once civil society actors achieve elite status, the importance of foreign funding declines. This is problematic since the reader is left unclear about how these CSOs have achieved the institutional sustainability necessary to move beyond a dependency on foreign funding. Moreover, in Cambodia, in particular, elite civil society actors remain overwhelmingly dependent on foreign financing. How they have gone through "elitisation" yet still rely on foreign funding requires further research.

Aside from these relatively minor issues, *Civil Society Elites* will undoubtedly be of use to scholars of civil society who are exploring new ways of conceptual theories as well as to readers working in the fields of aid policy and governance. Indeed, it is also a must-read for the layperson seeking a much clearer understanding of the history and structures of civil society in contemporary Cambodia and Indonesia.

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