Civil Society, Track III Forums and Community Building in Southeast Asia

In the period immediately after the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, the very idea of a people-oriented ASEAN became the basis of discussions regarding the anticipated direction of the association. This was accompanied by overtures of opening the association to stakeholders, particularly to the civil society organizations that operate at the Track III level, although in a limited manner. This rhetoric of the ASEAN elites of widening participation within the regional grouping gained more concrete forms from the early 2000 when ASEAN established new opportunities for participation by the various civil society actors. The signing of the ASEAN Charter in November 2007 and the preceding process of drafting the Charter further created the space for engagement between the regional civil society organizations at the Track III level and the ASEAN elites. In fact, the very idea of a people-oriented ASEAN was specifically mentioned among other matters in the Article 1 of the ASEAN Charter of 2007 (ASEAN Charter 2007: 4). Prior to this, the rhetoric of a more inclusive ASEAN was also reflected in the ASEAN Vision 2020, which committed the member states to pursue the vision of an ASEAN comprising of a community of caring societies, where civil society will be empowered (ASEAN Vision 2020 1997). ASEAN’s commitments to widen policy making were not a standalone endeavour but one aspect of an ambitious and ongoing reform programme. The ASEAN elites tried to reinvent and re-legitimize their political project from the latter part of the decade of 1990 after questions were raised regarding the relevance and practices of ASEAN, particularly in the wake of its inability to respond effectively during the East Asian Financial Crisis and assist the member states, which were reeling under the deleterious impact of the crisis. It was during the post-financial crisis period that the ASEAN elites began to engage with the civil society organizations in the imagined region of Southeast Asia through mechanism established outside the official processes, like the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA), a Track II initiative of the ASEAN ISIS which has been discussed in detail in the previous chapter and various other non-state actors at the Track III level like the ASEAN Civil Society Conference since 2005. ASEAN’s history has been characterized by a glaring absence of wide-ranging participation by civil society organizations and social movements and this appeal to widen participation by ASEAN symbolized a shift from ASEAN’s previous style of regional governance marked by close door meetings and tacit
agreements among regional elites leading to the widely held perception of ASEAN being an elitist as also an exclusive regional organization (Chavez 2006: 9). However, despite ASEAN’s people-oriented shift and the establishment of opportunities for participation by civil society organizations that operates at the Track III level, the efforts of the civil society based groups to influence ASEAN’s community building project in the region has largely remained ineffective (Gerard 2014: 2a).

Despite the curbs placed on voluntary associational activities in the Southeast Asian region, particularly in authoritarian settings where the state sponsors or even creates civil society organizations, the region boasts a vibrant but fragmented civil society that nevertheless constitutes a valuable space for political engagement and transformation (Weiss 2008: 152). It also constitutes an important space for alternative thinking on regional community building in Southeast Asia. In this regard, two different forms of civil society organizations in the region can be distinguished. On one hand, there exist smaller elite based non-state actors comprising scholars’ networks like the ASEAN-ISIS and regional business councils that tend to enjoy a comfortable and collaborative relationship with the ASEAN elites. These are civil society organizations that operate at the Track II level. On the other hand, there also exist a vast array of non-elite or subaltern based civil society organizations in the region that are fragmented in nature and which often struggle to get a hearing from the governments of the Southeast Asian states or the ASEAN officials because the activities of these non-elite civil society organizations threaten the governing status quo through their core emphasis on people’s empowerment. These non-elite based civil society organizations that operate at the Track III level include civil society groups that operate under the umbrella of ASEAN People’s Forum (APF) and earlier the ASEAN Civil Society Conference like the Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA), Forum Asia, Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN) and various other civil society based actors. Among this type of civil society based organizations that operate at the Track III level, developmental type civil society organizations that primarily focus on the functional needs of the particular constituencies tend to get a better response from the government officials as they are considered to be less troublesome than civil society based organizations that are engaged in political advocacy. However, it is important to note that although the non-elite civil society based organizations that are engaged in political advocacy do not enjoy a comfortable and cozy
relationship with government officials as well as ASEAN elites, nor do they hanker after such a relationship, they are nevertheless not averse to engaging with state elites and international organizations like ASEAN in order to advance their cause with the objective of transforming prevailing patterns of governance in the imagined region of Southeast Asia by emphasizing on protection of rights, democracy, justice and ensuring public participation. These are some of the issues that get under-emphasized in the top-down developmental approach to governance followed by the governments of the member states of ASEAN. The line of distinction between these two types of civil society organizations are sometimes blurred, with elite based networks like ASEAN-ISIS sometimes calling for fundamental changes within the ASEAN. But this distinction between these two types of civil society organizations, one at the Track II and the other at the Track III level, is useful if one has to understand the contested nature of the activities of the civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region, particularly the non-elite based organizations that operate at the Track III level (Nesadurai 2012: 169). This distinction between these two types of civil society organizations in the region is also useful in understanding the reasons behind the growing preference of the non-elite civil society organizations towards the ASEAN People’s Forum instead of the now defunct ASEAN People’s Assembly.

The region’s elite dominated conservative agenda came under more serious challenge not from the Track II level actors but from the activities of civil society based organizations that operate at the Track III level. Within the imagined region of Southeast Asia, there exists a vibrant and alternative regional civil society space in which a variety of non-elite civil society organizations participate to advance economic, social and political issues that are often at odds with the official agendas and interests of ASEAN and the governments of its member states (Acharya 2003: 381; Nesadurai 2012: 167). Civil society activism in the region comprising networking, advocacy and collective action represents a form of regionalism which is termed in the academic literature as ‘regionalism from below’ or ‘bottom up-regionalism’ characterized by the collaborative activities of non-elites to address specific concerns of groups and people neglected, marginalized or adversely affected by prevailing national and regional policies and to promote alternative conceptions of community building in the region. Although networking among the non-elite based civil society groups is one of the core aspects of regionalism from below, bottom up regionalism also involves the activities of institutionalized peoples’ forums that usually meet
parallel to official meetings of regional organizations like the ASEAN. In these public spheres, non-elite civil society organizations at the Track III level meet together to debate and deliberate on pressing issues, challenging government bureaucrats and officials if they are present to explain their policies and articulating alternative approaches to governance and regional community building that these civil society groups consider to be more inclusive and just in comparison to the status quo.

In the Southeast Asian region, the APA functioned from 2000 to 2009 as a Track II forum after which the APF emerged out of the annual ASEAN Civil Society Conference, which was first organized in 2005. It is important to note in this connection that both the ASEAN Civil Society Conference and the APF comprise networks that operate at the Track III level. The fourth ASEAN Civil Society Conference that took place in February 2009 was formally designated as the ASEAN People’s Forum. These Track III forums like the ASEAN Civil Society Conference and the APF have been tacitly accepted by the ASEAN states, even if somewhat reluctantly by some member states, as avenues through which the political elites of the ASEAN states can engage with the regional civil society organizations and consequently enhance ASEAN’s links with the common people of the region that will facilitate the process of building an ASEAN Community (Nesadurai 2012: 167). An effective participatory regionalism requires the governments of the member states of ASEAN and other ASEAN officials to be prepared to create space for these groups in ASEAN deliberations and decision making processes. It therefore, requires not only greater cooperation among regional social movements leading to the emergence of a regional civil society but also closer and positive interaction between the civil society organizations and the official regionalism pursued by the ASEAN member states (Acharya 2003: 382).

However, in reality, it has been seen from the experience of the APA that the ASEAN elites have been lukewarm in their support towards the APA during its tenure of existence in spite of it being an initiative of the ASEAN-ISIS to bring ASEAN closer to the people who inhabit the ASEAN member states (Caballero-Anthony 2006). Further, the civil society organizations in the region, particularly those which operate at the Track III level, have also been critical of the APA for the failure on its part to create formal links between the civil society actors in the region and the ASEAN elites and also for being too much under the control of the ASEAN-ISIS, thereby
being regarded by its detractors as being too close to the region’s governing elites. The strong
domination of the ASEAN-ISIS, and the fact that the APA has in general resulted in a modest
actual interaction between the civil society organizations and ASEAN generated a sense of
disappointment among the representatives of the civil society groups in the region. It is against
this backdrop with the objective of reclaiming their independent voice that the civil society
organizations at the Track III level in the region utilized the annual ASEAN Civil Society
Conference that was first organized in 2005 as the platform from which the ASEAN People’s
Forum was launched in February 2009 (Chandra 2009: 7). Incidentally, the ASEAN-ISIS voted
in 2009 to mark the demise of the ASEAN People’s Assembly, leaving the ASEAN People’s
Forum as the sole platform for hearing the peoples’ voices in Southeast Asia.

The role of various civil society based organizations at the Track III level with their alternative
imaginations of community building for the region will be analyzed in the final chapter of this
dissertation. First, the very idea of civil society and the nature of civil society organizations at the
Track III level in the region will be discussed in this chapter. Second, this chapter will analyze
the meaning of alternative regionalism and the manner in which several civil society based
organizations in the Southeast Asian region are trying to promote the idea of alternative
regionalism, which in many ways is different from the official elite based regionalism being
promoted under the auspices of ASEAN. The activities of several important civil society
organizations in the region will be discussed in the third section of this chapter. It will be
evaluated how the idea of alternative regionalism and alternative regional communities promoted
by various civil society groups in the region contradicts and even has the potential to undermine
the kind of regional community that the ASEAN elites are trying to promote in the imagined
region of Southeast Asia.

Civil Society in Southeast Asia

The importance of civil society as a political force gained worldwide prominence since the
beginning of the decade of 1980 in the context of fundamental global geopolitical and economic
changes and in the wake of numerous transitions all over the world from authoritarian and one
party communist regimes to democracy, which had been characterized by Samuel P. Huntington
as the ‘Third Wave’ of democracy (Huntington, 1991). By the middle of the decade of 1990,
liberal political leaders, academicians as well as activists were celebrating the triumph of democracy, free market capitalism and human rights throughout the world. During that time, the former Soviet Union and the whole of erstwhile East European communist regimes had collapsed and the centrally planned command economy model became totally discredited. Throughout the world, more than sixty countries had adopted some form of democratic government between 1974 and the middle of the decade of 1990. Western political leaders and scholars have mostly credited the civil society for its crucial role in the collapse of communism and authoritarianism along with accompanying transition to democracy, particularly in Eastern Europe. Civil society emerged as a normative ideal and began to be perceived as having the potential to liberate citizens from the oppressive state apparatus and to provide full economic and political freedom to them. The civil society emerged as a space that began to be viewed as an alternative to the domineering state.

Although the democratic transitions in Eastern Europe in the wake of the demise of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union were the most celebrated, Asia, and particularly the Southeast Asian region too had its share of dramatic moments in the decade of the 1980. The prominence of civil society in Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular is due in substantial part to the mass rallies and protest by citizens’ organizations and movements that played a critical role in the delegitimation and ouster of a number of authoritarian regimes in the decades of 1980 and 1990 (Alagappa 2004: 4). The mass public protests in 1986, known as the People Power Revolution, by some two million Filipinos had played a crucial role in the eventual ouster of the then Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos and his authoritarian government. In fact, mass protests have continued to remain an important part of the politics of the Philippines. In 1997, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Marcos’s declaration of martial law in 1972, around six hundred thousand citizens protested the anticipated lifting of the one term limit on the office of the President and forced the then incumbent President Fidel Ramos’s supporters to abandon their campaign. Moreover, in 2001, in the context of an impeachment stalemate in the Philippines Senate, a massive public protest called People Power II led to the arrest and eventual ouster of the legitimately elected but massively corrupt President Joseph Estrada and installation of the new President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in his place. The then Filipino President Joseph Estrada was accused of indulging in economic plunder in 2001 through receiving millions of dollars in
bribes during his thirty-one month tenure (Los Angeles Times 2001). Mass rallies and public protests have also taken place prominently at critical junctures in several countries across the Southeast Asian region that includes Thailand, Indonesia and even Burma.

The idea of civil society has traveled far from its origins in Western political philosophy to the United States, Latin America, Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. Until the early part of the decade of 1980, debates on civil society were largely limited to the history of ideas in the realm of Western political philosophy, particularly in the writings of Locke, Rousseau, Tocqueville, Hegel and Marx. With the ‘Third Wave’ of democratization since the decade of 1980, however, especially the disintegration of the former Soviet Union and the emergence of the public sphere as legitimate in the post-Soviet Central and East European states, discussion about the proper relationship between the individual, state, civil society and the market came to the limelight resulting in critical debates over the meaning of civil society and its role in politics. It is important to note in this connection that the dramatic expansion of civil society and its critical role in filling the space between the state and market belie the fact that the very idea of civil society is a contested concept (Hall 1995; Keane 1995). Adding further complexity, the dominant conceptualization of civil society reflects Western-centric perspectives, which is predominantly based on the view that the sphere of civil society seeks to promote democracy, an assumption that has been challenged in non-democratic contexts (Armstrong and Gilson 2010:23). However, it is important to note in this context that the very existence of civil society does not mean that it will always challenge the state, or that it will transgress the boundaries of the political sphere as constructed by the state. In other words, the existence of civil society may be an essential but not a sufficient precondition for the existence of democracy (Chandhoke 1995: 9-10). As it has been analyzed in the theoretical works of Antonio Gramsci, a hegemonized civil society can become a handmaiden and an important instrument to the state in its project of controlling social and political practices. Therefore, the presence of civil society is a crucial but not an adequate precondition for ensuring state accountability, which has been aptly reflected in the nature of relationship between state and civil society in large parts of Asia, including the Southeast Asian region.

Within the Asian context, the definition of civil society differs among those who have studied the emergence of civil society in the region. Some scholars have viewed civil society as non-
voluntary organizations that are engaged in development related work (Serrano 1994). Civil society has also been defined as the broad sphere transcending the state and private interests composed of non-governmental and non-commercial citizens and organizations devoted to social good (Coronel-Ferrer 1997: 1-15). Further, there have also been attempts to trace the evolution of civil society and its relevance to Southeast Asia by focusing on the indeterminate, descriptive as well as normative dimensions of this concept of civil society. As a result, the very usage of this concept of civil society has been subject to intense and ceaseless debates and discussions (Lee 2004: 1). It is significant to note that despite the conceptual and philosophical ambiguities associated with the concept of civil society, it has not stopped many scholars, policy-makers and activists from using and promoting the concept. It is also worth noting that different human communities in different regions across the world are concerned with establishing their own versions of civil society in their own differing ways, and therefore the search for the replication of a universal model of civil society throughout the world needs to be abandoned (Jayal 2001:124).

As a result of the interest that the concept of civil society had generated in Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular, it is not surprising that there has been a rapid increase in the number of civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region. This trend became more noticeable since the latter part of the decade of 1980 and early part of the decade of 1990 when the region was in throes of rapid structural and societal transformations. And in spite of the fact that the concept of civil society has been defined in diverse ways and its nature is extremely contested, a broad definition of civil society can be adopted for the purpose of understanding and analyzing the activities of such non state actors in the Southeast Asian region, many of which have their own alternative vision of community for the region. Civil Society in Southeast Asia refers to non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups and a variety of social movements that have, in one way or another, expressed their views on diverse issues that include the rights of ethnic groups, the environment and economic displacement among several others (Caballero-Anthony 2004: 572). This broad definition incorporates the specific characteristics of the civil society organizations in the region being non-profit and voluntary in nature and would also have to be transformative and innovative with emphasis on their alternative visions on development, governance and security.
Civil society in Asian countries, including in the states within the imagined region of Southeast Asia also constitutes an arena of power and struggle among competing interests comprising a diverse variety of voluntary and non-voluntary groups or non-state actors whose political orientation, interests, resources, capacities and methods span a wide spectrum. Even during times of maximum mobilization, when its components tend to portray themselves as united, civil society is often divided, with struggle and competition among groups simply held in abeyance (Alagappa 2004: 6). For example, in the Philippines, in 1986, the EDSA1 clearly deprived Ferdinand Marcos of moral authority, but the People Power movement comprising several disparate groups fragmented very soon. A persistent struggle continued in the Philippines over a diverse range of issues among civil society organizations rooted in middle class values and those with a leftist orientation. Further, civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region have displayed both democratic and anti-democratic tendencies, depending upon the structure and composition of civil society, the autonomy and inclination of non-state based organizations and the prevailing political and economic circumstances. And even when civil society groups are found to be supporting the cause of democracy in the region, the visions of democracy among such groups may vary significantly.

Various estimates show that the number of civil society organizations in the region has increased since the decade of the 1990. In Thailand, there are around 19,878 registered civil society organizations and the figure of such organizations in Malaysia and the Philippines are 14,000 and 70,200 respectively. The number of such organizations in Indonesia showed a massive increase from 10,000 in 1996 to 70,000 in 2000, while in neighbouring Singapore, civil society organizations represented mostly by registered charities and social organizations is around 4,462 (Hadiwinata 2003: 1). Even in Vietnam, a country under the political control of the Vietnamese communist party, there are about 600 civil society based groups at the provincial level and several thousand at the district and community level (Yamamoto 2000: 43). Most of these civil society organizations share common concerns that are primarily rooted in assisting local communities, alleviating the miserable living conditions of the poor, the underprivileged, and looking into the plight of abused women and children among others. Many civil society organizations in the region also share the common objective of empowering these people to fight for social justice, human rights, improved environmental conditions and overall better quality of
living standards. On several occasions, it has been found that civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region reflect the wide spectrum of challenges experienced by the individuals and communities in areas concerning poverty, economic and social injustice, women’s and children’s rights, minority rights, the environment and its resources and in these matters, neither the government nor the market are able to adequately address these challenges. Further, in the relatively less democratic societies in the region, civil societies essentially come in two different forms. One form consists of groups that focus on activities oriented towards community development to promote the idea of people-centered development. The other form of civil society organizations in the region comprise of groups, which concentrates on organizing specifically defined constituencies in order to generate social movements (Hadiwinata 2003: 25).

Apart from several thousand civil society organizations that are active nationally in the various Southeast Asian states, there are also a huge number of regional civil society based organizations. The role and activities of these civil society organizations with their multiple alternative visions of regional communities for Southeast Asia deserves special importance. These regional civil society organizations in Southeast Asia share many characteristics of the national civil society based groups and these organizations are mostly issue-based. In the imagined region of Southeast Asia, the prominent civil society organizations are mostly those, which are identified in their activities towards democratization, promotion of human rights and advocacy against globalization. The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, known as Forum-Asia based in Bangkok, has been at the forefront of the campaign against human rights abuses in the region. There is also the Asian Cultural Forum for Development or the ACFOD, also based in Bangkok that works on human rights and social issues (Caballero-Anthony 2004: 574). Another high profile regional civil society network that has been relentlessly campaigning against the process of globalization include the Focus on the Global South, which is based in Chulalongkorn University in Thailand and this group has been prominent in research and publication, networking and advocacy related work. There is also the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA), a network of Asian scholar-activists that aims to foster exchange among scholars and formulate alternative development perspectives to counter corporate-led process of globalization. Solidarity for Asian Peoples Advocacy (SAPA) is another civil society based organization in the region. It is a relatively new South and Southeast Asian
civil society group, comprising particularly non-governmental organizations with a specific working group on ASEAN and the ASEAN Charter. The SAPA itself was the result of the Strategic Action Planning for Advocacy meeting that was organized by several regional non-governmental organizations at Bangkok in February 2006. The Bangkok meeting took place as a result of informal consultations between the regional civil society organizations that attended the Kuala Lumpur ASEAN Civil Society Conference that was organized for the first time in December 2005.

Therefore, in the last two decades, the civil society organizations in Southeast Asia are not only increasing in number but also have become more vibrant. This is quite significant because of the fact that in the early part of the decade of 1980, many states in the region were characterized as semi-authoritarian states that stifled the development of civil society organizations. This was the period when notions of state power and legitimacy were very much predicated on economic growth and development—otherwise known as performance legitimacy. The rapid regional economic growth and development largely made up for the absence of active civil society organizations in many states in the region during that period. There were off-course exceptions to this phenomenon, as was in the case of the Philippines, which went through a difficult transition from martial law to democracy in 1986, aggravated by poor economic growth. Thus, it was only during the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98 that the number of civil society organizations in the region increased dramatically and their visibility also rose. While there were already national and regional civil society based organizations in Southeast Asia, which had been struggling against the nature and social implications of neoliberal approaches to economic development, it was with the outbreak of the regional financial crisis that the views and influence of these civil society based groups became popular and widely disseminated (Tadem and Tadem 2002). With the notion of performance legitimacy losing its credibility, and the growing dissatisfaction with the prevailing neoliberal policies, several civil society based groups in the region joined the ‘Battle of Seattle’ demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 with their own protest against the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and even the Asian Development Bank.

It is worth noting in this connection that as far as engagement between the regional civil society organizations and ASEAN was concerned, the regional civil society organizations had
not tried very hard to engage with ASEAN prior to the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98 (Caballero-Anthony 2006: 64). Instead, the regional civil society organizations directed their advocacy towards the more powerful multilateral organizations whose neoliberal rules and programmes were considered 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 similar threat. In fact, prior to the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, most of the civil society organizations in Southeast Asia, apart from the academic community were indifferent to ASEAN (Chandra 2006: 74). Many civil society organizations perceived ASEAN as an elitist club, primarily for member states’ foreign ministers-a club that made several regional initiatives for integration without any firm commitment to implement them.

There are also several reasons behind the eagerness shown by the civil society organizations to engage with ASEAN from the decade of the 1990. The first and one of the most important reason was the decision by the ASEAN elites to establish an ASEAN Community by 2015 as enunciated in the ASEAN Concord II signed at Bali in 2003 (ASEAN Concord II 2003). As it has already been discussed in the previous chapters, the ASEAN Community seeks to promote political, economic and socio-cultural cooperation through its three pillars-the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community respectively. Many regard the ASEAN Community as ASEAN’s most ambitious plan, which has forced the civil society organizations to take ASEAN more seriously (Chandra 2006: 74). Second, the civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region are increasingly of the view that ASEAN constitutes a platform from which to influence policy at the regional level. For example, on issues relating to trade, the ASEAN Secretariat has been keen to promote bilateral free trade agreements, an initiative that draws both support and concern from government officials and civil society organizations from the region. Some are concerned that the bilateral free trade agreements might damage multilateral trade negotiations under the auspices of the World Trade Organization, while others are concerned about the potential damage that this form of trade liberalization might have on ASEAN’s own integration process. Apart from the effects of trade diversion, pursuing different trade commitments can also be confusing. While ASEAN has been actively involved in trade liberalization, both multilaterally and bilaterally, it has received a very lukewarm response from the regional civil society organizations.
Third, while increasingly aware of the potentially deleterious impact that the ASEAN policies might have on the member states, the regional civil society organizations also acknowledge the potential benefits that ASEAN might generate for its member countries. The prevailing view is that despite the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, ASEAN still continues to exist, thereby proving that the governments of member states still believes that the regional association could be useful. ASEAN has been regarded as one of the most successful regional organizations in the developing world primarily because of its ability to maintain regional peace, security and sustained economic development in spite of temporary setbacks. Over the years, since the 1980’s and particularly after the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, ASEAN elites gradually started to open the association in order to enable the civil society to engage with ASEAN on a variety of issues. However, the civil society groups in the region are yet to consolidate among themselves on how and to what extent their engagement needs to be with ASEAN, thereby limiting their engagement with the association (Chandra 2006: 75). Among the various civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region, the two most important forums that have evolved over the years are ASEAN Civil Society Conference and the SAPA. In essence, these two forums are regarded as alternative forums and networking for engaging with ASEAN. The manner in which many civil society based groups have tried to engage with ASEAN has actually led to the emergence of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference in 2005 and the SAPA in 2006.

Civil Society and Alternative Regionalism in Southeast Asia

As it has already been analyzed in the third chapter of this dissertation, the ASEAN Charter, since its enactment in 2007, has drawn a lot of interest among civil society and social movements which perceives the process as an opportunity to bring the regional arena aspects of their advocacy that are regional in nature to the forefront. Even before the signing of the ASEAN Charter, several civil society groups expressed their aspirations for regionalism by submitting their inputs at the time of drafting of the ASEAN Charter. In spite of limited engagement with ASEAN in the past, the submissions were put together with relative ease because those inputs from the civil society organizations were based on the then existing local, national and global advocacy. It is a well known fact that ASEAN has largely been inaccessible to the civil society organizations in the region and is not known for adopting initiatives that directly target broad sections of the population residing in the member states of ASEAN. Many civil society groups
had in fact questioned the value of engaging with the ASEAN Charter process or with ASEAN itself (Chavez 2006: 2). Several civil society groups are in fact quite skeptical about the process of regional community building under the auspices of ASEAN. In reality, ASEAN may have matured politically, but its ownership by the people of Southeast Asia has tragically been left behind (Dano 2008: 3). It is against this backdrop that the very idea of alternative regionalism emerged in the Southeast Asian region in which the civil society organizations played a key role.

Recent examples from Latin America suggest that it may be possible to have an integration of and regionalism for the people who inhabit a particular region. The idea of alternative regionalism has provided the motivation to the civil society groups in the Southeast Asian region to engage with ASEAN (Chavez 2006: 2). The concept of alternative regionalism is becoming a popular concept given the increasing role and importance of the civil society organizations, particularly those at the Track III level, in the institutional development and community building in the imagined region of Southeast Asia. As ASEAN moves towards achieving the ASEAN Community by 2015, policy makers and civil society activists alike talk about the importance of people and their interests in the association’s regional projects and activities. ASEAN elites have advanced the idea of a people-oriented ASEAN in an attempt to garner the wider support of the constituencies in endorsing the regional grouping’s initiatives. In this respect, it is significant to note that the civil society organizations have mostly remained skeptical about the idea of a people-oriented ASEAN and have instead put forward the concept of a people-centered ASEAN, which put the people at the center of the regionalization process of the association. While discussing the idea of alternative regionalism in the context of the Southeast Asian region, the conceptual difference between the idea of a people-oriented and a people-centered ASEAN will be analyzed later in the subsequent paragraphs.

However, in spite of widespread use of the term by activists and scholars in Southeast Asia, there is yet a common understanding among relevant actors in the regionalization process as to what alternative regionalism entails for. The concept of alternative regionalism is certainly a matter of relativity and is subject to many interpretations. The so called mainstream and progressive regionalists have differed in their interpretations of the substances relating to the idea of alternative regionalism. Although it is not always the case within the context of the Southeast Asian region, the mainstream regionalists generally favour the neoliberal principles while the
progressive regionalists have added a socialist flavour in order to advance their interpretation of the idea of alternative regionalism. There also exist activists and groups that stand in the middle of these two groups and they tend to perceive ASEAN’s brand of regionalism with a sense of pragmatism. In a general sense, the word alternative implies values, norms, institutions and systems that exist outside the traditional, established mainstream systems and institutions. In essence, alternative regionalism constitutes a reformist effort to improve the existing systems and institutions (Chandra 2009: 2). Therefore, in a general sense, alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia refers to the improvement and even expansion of ASEAN’s initiatives towards integration. Influenced by the regional initiatives undertaken by their Western Counterparts, such as the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), advocates of mainstream regionalism in Southeast Asia often call for the acceleration or a further deepening of integration. There are also other mainstream regionalists who tend to view alternative regionalism in the form of Pan Asia, East Asia or Asia-Pacific regionalism. In contrast, many progressive regionalists perceive alternative regionalism from a different standpoint altogether than what has been advocated by the mainstream regionalists. Among the relatively politically left of centre activists and scholars, alternative regionalism is used to denoted a kind of regionalism that has its origin in the social movements as a result of lengthy opposition to neoliberalism. In this respect, there are several civil society organizations in Southeast Asia, which use the Latin American model as their reference point while advocating for alternative regionalism. Latin American initiatives in the recent past, like the Bolivarian Alternative for the People of Our America (ALBA) and the Treaty for the Commerce of Our Peoples (TCP) became common points of reference among many of the civil society organizations in Southeast Asia, which favour the progressive regionalist notion of alternative regionalism. ALBA, which was primarily a response of some of the socialist states in Latin America, became the antidote to the United States backed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and it was signed by Cuba and Venezuela on December 14, 2004 with Bolivia joining additionally in April 2006 (Fox 2006).

However, a careful scrutiny reveals that full application of the progressive regionalists’ model of alternative regionalism based on ALBA or the TCP in the Southeast Asian region is open to debate and is also not feasible particularly in a highly interdependent world where economies of most of the Southeast Asian states are fully integrated with the global economy. There are also
several questions and the debate continues as to what exactly constitutes the ‘Bolivarian Alternative’, about which programmes, agreements and joint ventures fall under the grand umbrella of the ALBA, and about what actually sets the alternative apart (Fox 2006). Moreover, it would become problematic for ASEAN in order to become relevant for the people of the Southeast Asian region if the regional grouping keeps relying on the inputs from the mainstream regionalists and serves as being the instrument for the facilitation of the extreme neoliberal ideas and the political and economic interests of the major powers in the region. If one moves beyond the ideological fault lines in order to understand the meaning of the concept of alternative regionalism in the context of the Southeast Asian region, it would be found that the very concept of people remains absent in the true sense of the term from the regional project under the auspices of ASEAN. It is because of this that the concept of people is a crucial component in the contemporary context of alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia. As a result, in the context of the Southeast Asian region, alternative regionalism can be referred to as spontaneous, bottom-up process that recognizes the importance of wide group of stakeholders comprising of civil society organizations as well as academic community, trade unions and business organizations in the making of regional systems and institutions (Chandra 2009: 4). The objective of these regional institutions and systems are not only oriented towards the interests and needs of the people but are also oriented towards being people-centered. Despite the centrality of the people, the state remains an important actor in the process of building regional community as far as its role in facilitating, mediating and channeling the interests of the people in the wider regional context. However, state actors in the Southeast Asian region are also increasingly aware of the reality of their limited ability to cope with the extensive challenges at the national, regional and global levels. Simultaneously, increasing maturity of the civil society organizations to work autonomously and their capabilities to address issue-specific challenges have made them a natural partner for the state actors in pursuing regional projects in Southeast Asia. It is because of this that several regional projects in Southeast Asia are increasingly becoming the shared responsibility of both the state as well as the non-state actors (Chandra 2009: 4). This constitutes an important aspect of the very idea of alternative regionalism in the context of Southeast Asia. The idea of alternative regionalism is based on the notion of complimentarity and solidarity, instead of relying on excessive national interest and competition, which have been favoured by neorealists as well as neoliberal institutionalists.
In the economic arena, alternative regionalism in the Southeast Asian regional context involves a move away from the free market determined regionalism prevalent since the decade of the 1990 towards a brand of regionalism that gives recognition to a diverse range of thinking on economic and policy making matters for the progress of the region’s economy. For example, such alternative thinking would give preference to fair and managed trade rather than free trade. Civil society groups and networks oriented towards promoting the idea of alternative regionalism in Southeast Asia value the importance of elements like strong social protection in the path towards economic development. Civil society organizations like the SAPA are in favour of ensuring strong social protection in the process of economic development and have given importance to issues like redistributive justice, poverty eradication, growth with equity and non-discrimination (SAPA 2006). Therefore, in a nutshell, the idea of alternative regionalism has given preference to the notion of people-centered regionalism, which has been missing from the kind of elite-centered regionalism that ASEAN has tried to promote.

While analyzing the idea of alternative regionalism in the context of Southeast Asia, it is also important to understand the meaning of the term people-centered as something that is conceptually different from the term people-oriented. During the celebration of the forty-first anniversary of ASEAN in 2008, regional civil society organizations and networks organized a public debate with ASEAN officials on challenges relating to the implementation of the ASEAN Charter and the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, namely the ASEAN political-security community, ASEAN economic community and the ASEAN socio-cultural community. The deliberations between the various civil society organizations and the ASEAN officials also included the issue of transforming ASEAN into a people-centered organization. At this meeting, high level ASEAN officials criticized civil society’s use of the term people-centered ASEAN, and proposed instead the use of the more preferred term by ASEAN officials and the governments of the member states, which is people-oriented ASEAN. Although both these two terms might appear to be similar in meaning, they both have different meanings and can also be interpreted in different ways. The term people-oriented ASEAN means that the policies pursued by ASEAN elites will be oriented towards the concerns and interests of the people. However, under this principle, the final authority for decision making still lies among the region’s political elites. On the contrary, ASEAN as a people-centered organization means that the regional
grouping will place people at the heart or center of its decision making process (Chandra 2009: 10). People will be essentially at the heart of the decision making process under the principle of a people-centered ASEAN. Core policies, which affect the livelihood and well being of the people across the region needs to be determined by and for the people through democratic means if ASEAN is to transform itself as a people-centered organization.

It is significant to note in this connection that ASEAN elites’ reservation about transforming ASEAN into a truly people-centered organization is not without reason. Having been a relatively closed, non-accountable and non-transparent association for many decades since its inception in 1967, it is certainly difficult for the ASEAN elites and policy makers to surrender their decision making power to the people. In fact, given the history of ASEAN, the very introduction of the concept of people-oriented ASEAN itself marks an important point of departure towards regionalization efforts in Southeast Asia under the auspices of ASEAN. ASEAN policy makers, particularly those from the relatively more democratic states in the region can also argue that their voice represents the concerns and interests of the people as most of those governments have been elected democratically through fair and open election. Given the fact that ASEAN has always remained as an association for the elite, the notion that ASEAN needs to be oriented towards the people of the member states could signify a dramatic reorientation of ASEAN’s raison d’être (Collins 2008: 314). Although, in its founding Bangkok Declaration of August 08, 1967, the ASEAN member states have committed themselves towards raising the living standard of their people and secure for them the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity, a cursory evaluation of ASEAN’s long history shows the centrality of state security and specifically safeguarding the interests of the state elites (Collins 2003). As a result, a dramatic shift from state-centered to people-centered policy making would constitute an even more challenging task for the ASEAN elites to pursue in the region.

Nevertheless, the civil society groups have pursued the highest call in their efforts to reform ASEAN. It is primarily due to this reason that the concept of people-centered instead of people-oriented ASEAN, has been at the core of their advocacy works and messages of civil society groups and networks, which are oriented towards the idea of alternative regionalism. Some of the civil society activists have expressed their reservations about the concept of people-oriented ASEAN as the term still provides too significant space for policy makers to decide matters that
are too important for the welfare and well-being of the people of the Southeast Asian region. A people-oriented ASEAN does call for the policy makers to listen to the will of the people, but it also allows them to make the final call on whether the will of the people would be implemented in practice (Chandra 2009: 10). Therefore, it becomes problematic for these civil society organizations to allow a handful of ASEAN elites and key policy makers to take the final decisions on issues that affect the lives of the people of the Southeast Asian region. On the other hand, the concept of people-centered ASEAN allows more direct involvement and integration of the people in the decision making process of ASEAN. Under the principle of a people-centered ASEAN, ASEAN elites and other key policy makers matter in so far as their role in facilitating the inputs from relevant constituents as well as the formulation of the policy proposal. The final draft of this policy proposal would then be consulted further with relevant non-state actors across the region. Openness and transparency on the part of the state actors also comprise another important component of the concept of people-centered ASEAN. While being consulted about a policy proposal, the people or the relevant non-state actors will gather adequate information that will enable them to make the necessary judgement about the proposed policy.

However, in spite of being noble in its objectives, the concept of a people-centered ASEAN Community is potentially difficult to implement as it is most likely to undermine the process of ASEAN integration. Once this people-centered principle is adopted, the ASEAN and its member governments will be required to bear the additional expenditure of implementing such a consultative process. Those who are against this principle of people-centered ASEAN have argued that if this principle is at all adopted at any time in future, the progress of ASEAN integration will be retarded. Further, the ASEAN elites have so far shown little or no inclination on their part to implement the idea of a people-centered ASEAN. Instead, ASEAN elites perceive the adoption of the idea of a people-oriented ASEAN as a significant step towards reforming ASEAN. In this regard, the 2006 ASEAN guidelines for civil society accreditation, which was revised in 2012 provides a valuable insight about the nature of importance that the ASEAN elites are willing to provide to the civil society groups in the region. The ASEAN guidelines of 2006 and 2012 stated unequivocally that civil society organizations in order to get ASEAN accreditation or affiliation must enhance, strengthen and realize the aims and objectives of ASEAN towards achieving community building that is in line with one or more of the three
pillars of the ASEAN Community (ASEAN Guidelines on CSOs 2006; ASEAN Guidelines on CSOs 2012). The civil society groups are required in writing to abide by the policies, guidelines, directives and other decisions of ASEAN and ASEAN standing committee can terminate the affiliation of any civil society group if it is found to be acting in a contrary manner. Therefore, there is no gainsaying the fact that given the nature of engagement with civil society groups that the ASEAN elites have in their mind when they proclaimed a people-oriented future for ASEAN, the process of interaction with civil society groups will be determined, directed and controlled by the political elites of member states of ASEAN (Collins 2008: 316). Also, the idea of a people-centered ASEAN will face tremendous opposition, particularly from the political elites of the less developed least democratic states within the association. For the relatively newer member states like Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Vietnam, in particular, the association’s ASEAN Way, which to a considerable extent, allows the state elites greater space to exercise control over their population, has been one of the primary attractions that motivated these states to join ASEAN in the first place (Chandra 2009: 11). As a result, the ASEAN elites may not be favourable to the idea of a people-centered ASEAN as it has the potential to break the very unity of the association. It is noteworthy in this respect that attempts by ASEAN to increase its engagement with the civil society groups and active role by some of the member states to bring about political change in Burma has prompted the country’s military government to reconsider its position within ASEAN. There are reports that Burma has even officially applied for membership of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in May 2008 (Yhome 2008). At present, Burma enjoys only observer status within SAARC.

All these instances prove beyond doubt that the civil society organizations will encounter an uphill task in their endeavour to build an alternative people-centered regional community in Southeast Asia by transforming the existing elite-centric nature of ASEAN. The very imagination of a people-centered regional community as something that is conceptually different from people-oriented regional community under the auspices of ASEAN is an important element of the concept of alternative regionalism, which the various civil society groups in the region are

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9 It was clearly stated in the 2006 ASEAN Guidelines on relations with civil society organizations that affiliation with ASEAN may not be granted to a civil society organization if its activities and objectives are found to be inconsistent with the aims and objectives of ASEAN as embodied in the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 and the ASEAN Concord I &II.
trying to promote. Undoubtedly, one of the most common threads in the promotion of the vision of alternative regionalism among the civil society groups in the Southeast Asian region is to ensure peoples participation in the ASEAN decision making process.

*Activities and Programmes of Civil Society Groups in Southeast Asia*

While analyzing the activities and programmes of various civil society organizations in Southeast Asia having an alternative imagination of community building for the region, it is important to critically look into the spaces available to these civil society groups for pursuing their agenda. An evaluation of the nature of spaces sanctioned by the ASEAN elites for participation by the civil society based actors reveals that they offer limited opportunities for civil society organizations to contest policies and influence official processes. It is because of this limited opportunity that the civil society activists have consequently pursued their agenda outside the spaces sanctioned by ASEAN through what is known as ‘created spaces’, such as organizing conferences parallel to official ASEAN summits and other meetings by ASEAN officials. In ‘created spaces’, collective action is mobilized in a manner, which do not require the sanction of governmental authorities (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007: 785). In ‘created spaces’, the participants themselves determine what takes place and who can participate unlike the political arenas and modes of engagement, which are established and recognized by ASEAN. In spite of not being sanctioned by states, ‘created spaces’ are no doubt a form of political participation as such spaces have similar objective or intension of shaping and influencing official ASEAN policy. ASEAN’s restrictive and inimical approach to engaging the civil society organizations in the region has prompted some of those civil society groups to undertake political activities outside the formal channels that have been created for their participation. But political participation by civil society groups through ‘created spaces’ is still intended to influence and shape ASEAN policy. Consequently, despite the apparent independence of these ‘created spaces’ from official intervention, the boundaries of these spaces are still structured in relation to ASEAN practices, meaning that civil society organizations may condition their activities according to the rules and procedures that govern the spaces that ASEAN has sanctioned for their participation (Gerard 2014: 270b). For example, the civil society groups may tone down their level of criticisms of official ASEAN policy in the hope that doing so will increase the chances of gaining an audience with key ASEAN officials. Moreover, as there is an absence of
any mediating structures between the activities in ‘created spaces’ and their institutional targets, civil society organizations may be dependent upon the support of state actors in the region or the external parties outside the region for promoting their agenda. Hence, even apparently spontaneous forms of political expression need to be considered in the context of power relationships with state and regional actors. Therefore, whether civil society organizations in Southeast Asia act independently or pursue their agenda through channels sanctioned by ASEAN, they are mostly ineffectual in shaping ASEAN policy (Gerard 2014: 266b). It is in this context that one has to critically look into the activities of the various civil society organizations in Southeast Asia and their mode of interaction with ASEAN.

**ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC)/ ASEAN People’s Forum (APF)**

It has already been discussed in the fourth chapter of this dissertation that the civil society groups, by and large, at the Track III level were frustrated with the activities of the ASEAN People’s Assembly. However, in contrast, the civil society organizations at the Track III level quite enthusiastically embraced the ASEAN Civil Society Conference, which held its first meeting in Malaysia in December 2005 alongside the eleventh ASEAN summit. Although the Malaysian government commissioned the ASEAN Study Centre of the University Technology Mara to convene the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference, the civil society groups were very much involved in the preparations for the event. In the light of monumental challenges that lie ahead, the civil society groups deliberated on these issues at the conference under the theme ‘Building Our Common Future Together’ and identified five sub-themes that include human dignity, economy and trade, environment and natural resource management, women, youth and indigenous groups and ASEAN identity and media. The civil society activists at the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference recognized the need for more openness and transparency at all levels of ASEAN power structure in order to secure greater accountability and enable civil society to effectively play their roles as watch dogs, monitors and early warning systems. Towards this end, the deep feeling among the civil society activists was that civil society organizations were not getting access to accurate, relevant and timely information on matters concerning the people of the region (ACSC 2005). In 2005, the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference provided a direct interface between the civil society groups and the ASEAN elites, which the civil society organizations had expected previously from the APA. Consequently, the
civil society organizations were also pleased as for the first time, a civil society prepared conference statement was being directly presented to the ASEAN leaders by the representatives of civil society organizations, although only with a brief fifteen minute interface, instead of being presented through a mediator as it had been the case with the ASEAN People’s Assembly (ACSC 2005; Dano 2007: 26). In fact, some scholars have termed this interface between the representatives of civil society groups and ASEAN leaders as a new turning point in ASEAN-civil society relations as no such occasion had ever been pursued in the past (Chandra 2009: 6). The statement issued by the ASEAN Civil Society Conference of 2005 welcomed this interface between the ASEAN elites and civil society activists as an unprecedented gesture and conveyed their appreciation to the ASEAN leaders for providing them this opportunity (ACSC 2005). The ASEAN leaders also declared in 2005 that ASEAN would recognize the ASEAN Civil Society Conference as the formal platform for the civil society groups to be convened in conjunction with the annual ASEAN summits (Ramirez 2008: 6). The shift that was reflected in the regional civil society organizations’ preferences towards the ASEAN Civil Society Conference was accompanied by the creation of a new regional civil society network named Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy after the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference. From that time onwards, SAPA had taken a leading role in organizing further conferences parallel to the ASEAN summits, which will be discussed later.

However, it is significant to note in this connection that the Philippines government in 2007 was not willing to accord the status of official civil society platform to the second ASEAN Civil Society Conference that was organized alongside the twelfth ASEAN summit at Cebu. The tradition of institutionalizing the engagement between the civil society organizations and ASEAN that was started during the 2005 ASEAN summit was carried forward by the civil society organizations at the next ASEAN summit that was supposed to be held at Cebu in December 2006. But the Philippines government postponed the ASEAN summit to January 2007 due to a typhoon, which in fact had not hit Cebu at all, giving rise to the speculation that there were other political and security reasons behind the postponement of the ASEAN summit (Dano 2007: 27). Months before the twelfth ASEAN summit, the standing committee of the ASEAN and the host Philippines government were unwilling to recognize the ASEAN Civil Society Conference to be part of the official programme and provided the fifteen minute time slot for the
civil society organizations’ interface with ASEAN leaders to the representatives of the APA. This decision was taken by the ASEAN elites and the then Philippines government to accord this status to the APA as it was viewed as less threatening, particularly by the administration of President Arroyo, which was itself encountering serious challenges to its legitimacy from vociferous Filipino civil society organizations (Ramirez 2008: 7). It is important to note that despite the previous rebuff from the Philippines government and the postponement of the twelfth ASEAN summit, the civil society organizations working under the banner of SAPA pursued the holding of the second ASEAN Civil Society Conference at Cebu in the Philippines from December 11-13, 2006. More than three hundred civil society activists participated at the conference from across the Southeast Asian region and came out with a statement that was officially submitted to the ASEAN Heads of State and the ASEAN Secretariat. The statement highlighted the need for a people-centered and people-driven ASEAN Community build upon alternative framework of regionalism that goes beyond economic integration, upholds the rights of the people, promotes environmental sustainability and equitable access to resources (Dano 2007: 27).

The third ASEAN Civil Society Conference took place in Singapore where there was no interaction between the representatives of civil society groups and the ASEAN leaders. In fact, in spite of not having any official endorsement from ASEAN, SAPA nevertheless pursued the holding of the third ASEAN Civil Society Conference at Singapore from November 02-04, 2007 where more than two hundred representatives from people’s organizations and non-governmental organizations from across the Southeast Asian region attended. The fourth and fifth ASEAN Civil Society Conference were organized in Thailand in February and October 2009 and these two conferences were also designated as the first and second ASEAN People’s Forum. The sixth ASEAN Civil Society Conference took place at Hanoi in October 2010 and from that time onwards, all these conferences were designated as APF thereby effectively turning all the previous ASEAN Civil Society Conferences into sessions of the APF. The APF conference is held independently in the country, which holds the chair of the ASEAN, either in advance of or parallel to the ASEAN summits. The APF conference accordingly took place at Indonesia in 2011, at Cambodia in 2012, at Brunei in 2013 and in 2014, it was held in Burma.
For the regional civil society organizations, the APF is clearly the more authentic social forum unlike the APA. Although both the APA and the APF involved deliberations from the civil society groups, the ASEAN-ISIS was seen to be dominating the agenda of the APA and the civil society groups were also not involved in a meaningful way in its decision making, which was the prerogative of the ASEAN-ISIS (Nesadurai 2012: 172). The ASEAN Civil Society Conference and later the APF were acknowledged as the platform through which regional civil society organizations would engage with ASEAN on an annual basis. The APF emerged as a space for the people of the imagined region of Southeast Asia that is not only autonomous but also inclusive representing the diversity of people of the region. With the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference being convened in December 2005 in Malaysia, the ASEAN Civil Society Conference and the APF evolved as the civil society led process that began to be organized every year with the aim of building community and solidarity among the people of Southeast Asia, increasing networking in the host country, socializing ASEAN among the people of the region and creating the necessary space for engagement with the ASEAN leaders (About ACSC/APF 2014).

The second ASEAN Civil Society Conference was held at Cebu in the Philippines from December 10-12, 2006, which was a continuation of the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference held at Malaysia in December 2005. The second ASEAN Civil Society Conference noted with grave concern about the contraction of democracy and persistence of internal conflicts that had created a situation of volatile peace in the region, which ASEAN has been unable to address due to its adherence to the norm of non-interference and its refusal to create regionally viable mechanisms to find acceptable solutions to what are clearly regional concerns (ACSC 2006). The statement issued after the conclusion of the second ASEAN Civil Society Conference challenged the principle of non-intervention followed by ASEAN since its inception and reiterated the need for regionally addressing human rights concerns in conflict areas and institutionalization of conflict prevention mechanisms that prioritize dialogue and cooperation for building a lasting peace within the member states of ASEAN. The statement noted that the Southeast Asian region comprises of states like Burma, Thailand and Cambodia that have questionable records on democracy and ensuring human rights for people inhabiting those states. Further, the second ASEAN Civil Society Conference also resolved to continue to engage with ASEAN, particularly
the official process of the ASEAN Charter and challenge the ASEAN at all levels, making use of all available spaces and opportunities to defend and advance the rights and interests of the marginalized and excluded people in all societies and communities in the region (ACSC 2006). The conference also put forward the demand of automatic inclusion of members of the civil society in all decision making process of the ASEAN. The objectives of the third ASEAN Civil Society Conference that took place at Singapore in November 2007 included enrichment and deepening of civil society organizations’ understanding of ASEAN and regional processes and to provide a platform for discussing issues of common interest and ways to respond to them (ACSC III 2007).

Therefore, there is little skepticism on the fact that the ASEAN Civil Society Conference or the APF emerged as the most critical platform for the civil society organizations at the Track III level to engage with ASEAN elites and simultaneously provide inputs about alternative ideas about regional community in the imagined region of Southeast Asia. It is noteworthy that the ASEAN Civil Society Conference also emerged as the largest gathering of civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region and has contributed to raising awareness about ASEAN among civil society organizations from ten member states, its processes, mechanisms and activities (ACSC/APF 2011). In fact, among other things, the forum has become the venue for regional inter-sectoral networking and dialogue across the wide range of regional advocacy activities and issues such as development, human rights, women’s empowerment, child protection, poverty eradication, climate change, social protection, the protection of migrant workers, fisheries and agriculture, freedom of information, the rights of ethnic minorities and environmental issues.

However, one of the most challenging tasks of ASEAN is to maintain its significance and accountability to its own people. If ASEAN has to remain credible, trustworthy and relevant at present and in the future, it is imperative that the regional grouping must not leave the people behind. ASEAN has hardly been evaluated, assessed or monitored by its own people because they do not see it as important to their lives (ACSC/APF 2011). For ASEAN to pass this test and remain relevant to the people of the region, the regional grouping has to ensure effective participation of civil society with its sectoral bodies and human rights mechanisms, both in the process of establishing and decision making following the principles of transparency and
inclusiveness. The statement issued during the ASEAN People’s Forum conference held at Jakarta in May 2011 reaffirmed the fundamental principles of democracy, rule of law, human rights and dignity, good governance, the best interests of the child, meaningful and substantive people’s participation and sustainable development in pursuit of economic, social, gender and ecological justice so as to bring peace and prosperity to the ASEAN region. The statement reiterated that the governments of the ASEAN member states need to adopt a more holistic approach towards development and ensure equal and just treatment to its people and harmonize all its policies and practices of all its pillars. The statement issued at the APF conference of 2011 specifically mentioned that ASEAN governance has not been driven by people-centered governance and a restrictive environment exists in the ASEAN member states for the meaningful participation and engagement of civil society organizations (ACSC/APF Statement 2011). Quite alarmingly, the statement further noted that the ASEAN member states are not taking sufficient steps to implement the ASEAN Charter and other documents, particularly relating to protection of rights of migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees. Moreover, as most of the ASEAN member states are beset with internal conflicts arising from historical injustices and the militarist approach of the state towards any form of dissent, the poor human rights situations of communities including women and children where armed conflict and militarization takes place gets further exacerbated. The joint statement issued during the APF conference held in April 2013 underlined the need for establishing a dispute prevention, settlement and reconciliation mechanism for addressing intra-state and inter-state territorial jurisdictional disputes in Southeast Asia in order to pursue the task of promoting a genuinely people-centered ASEAN and the realization of ASEAN Community (ACSC/APF 2013). The joint statement also called upon the ASEAN elites to take immediate steps to halt human rights violations in the region.

*Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA)*

Apart from the ASEAN People’s Forum, there are also other notable autonomous civil society organizations and networks in the Southeast Asian region having an alternative vision of regional community in Southeast Asia. One of the most prominent among those civil society groups is the SAPA. Following the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference held at Kuala Lumpur in December 2005, SAPA was established in February 2006 through the efforts of Forum-Asia, Southeast Asia Committee for Advocacy (SEACA), the AsiaDHRRA and Focus on the Global South.
SAPA gradually emerged as a fairly representative regional advocacy network with a membership of about hundred national as well as regional civil society organizations and networks that also participates in SAPA organized regional civil society consultations on a wide range of concerns affecting Asian communities in areas like human rights, democracy, globalization, trade, finance, labour, sustainable development and environmental protection, and ensuring peace and human security (SAPA 2007). The most important point of SAPA advocacy is people’s empowerment, particularly those sections that are marginalized or adversely affected by the policies of the governments of the ASEAN member states on violation of human rights, destruction of environment and people’s livelihood by the developmental projects mostly undertaken by the multinational corporations as well as addressing issues concerning people’s participation in official governance process. In order to achieve these goals, SAPA network aims at improving communication, cooperation and coordination among the non-governmental organizations operating regionally. The statement issued by SAPA working group on ASEAN on March 23, 2014 stated unequivocally that the dream of a people-centered ASEAN will remain elusive and unattainable if ASEAN continues to pay lip service on the issue of human rights and people’s participation (SAPA 2014). The statement further outlined that it is ironic that as ASEAN trumpets its achievements and progresses towards economic integration, it backpedals on people’s rights and fundamental freedoms.

Since its inception, SAPA as a non-elite civil society organization had taken the initiative to convene the meetings of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference as an annual event for the regional civil society groups. In December 2008, SAPA also collaborated with local civil society organizations in Thailand the fourth ASEAN Civil Society Conference as well as the first ASEAN People’s Forum. SAPA is relatively a new network of Asian non-governmental organizations, trade unions along with community based organizations. After it was established in February 2006, SAPA has four working groups, which work on issues pertaining to ASEAN, human rights, migration and labour and on agriculture and rural development. Among all these working groups, the working group on ASEAN is so far the most active (Chandra 2009: 7). The vision of the members associated with SAPA is to establish an ASEAN Community that will champion human rights, democracy, peace, human development, economic justice, tolerance, cooperation and solidarity. SAPA wants to create a regional community in Southeast Asia that
strengthens the interaction and exchange between peoples and communities. Above all, activists associated with SAPA are of the view that ASEAN as an institution needs to uphold people’s participation. ASEAN needs to be an institution that is capable of addressing transboundary economic, social and environmental conflicts in a peaceful and just manner through diplomacy beyond the current ineffective ASEAN Way, particularly the norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states (SAPA 2006).

In fact, one of the pertinent reasons behind the establishment of SAPA was the recognition of the need for an alternative mechanism, either in the form of a forum or a platform, where information and resources could be shared in order to enhance the effectiveness of civil society engagement with various inter-governmental processes that were rapidly increasing in Asia. Since its establishment, SAPA became an open platform for consultation, cooperation and coordination among various Asian social movements and civil society organizations that includes non-governmental organizations, people’s organizations and trade unions (Chandra 2009: 7). SAPA also aims to increase cooperation among its members and partners to increase the impact and effectiveness of their engagement with inter-governmental bodies like ASEAN. It is also significant to note that the main targets of advocacy of SAPA are not confined to ASEAN and Southeast Asia alone but also extend beyond it. Apart from ASEAN, other important targets of advocacy of SAPA network include the SAARC, the Asia Development Bank, Asia-Europe Meeting, the United Nations and so on. SAPA’s organizational structure and work programme has assisted it in the task of getting the civil society organizations in the region to work collectively by lobbying with ASEAN and principally convincing about the regional nature of the issues they confront (Ramirez 2008: 7). SAPA through its activities has in fact aided in the development of a counter-regional project that is different from the regional project pursued by the ASEAN elites (Nesadurai 2012: 173).

SAPA’s alternative model of Southeast Asian regionalism consists of both substantive and procedural dimensions. In substantive terms, SAPA challenged each of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, which are the ASEAN Political and Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Through advocating a people-centered and people-empowered regionalism, SAPA emphasizes the centrality of human rights, human dignity and human security in the framework of political and security cooperation
of ASEAN and also recognized that state can constitute one source of security as well as insecurity for the people of the region (Dosch 2009: 80). On matters relating to economic governance, SAPA focuses upon redistributive justice, equitable growth along with labour rights. For building the regional socio-cultural community, SAPA emphasizes the centrality of entitlements and freedoms while advocating a right based and human security approach to the issue of migrant workers, which contrasts with the national security framework through which the governments of the member states of ASEAN tend to view the matter. SAPA’s inputs to the process of drafting of the ASEAN Charter prior to 2007 reflected these principles (Nesadurai 2012: 174). It is interesting to note that at the APF meeting in September 2010 at Vietnam, SAPA called for a fourth pillar on environment to be added to the proposed ASEAN Community so that important issues relating to climate change, natural resource conservation and management and other environmental issues will be addressed in a coherent manner rather than in a piece-meal fashion through the socio-cultural community pillar where environmental issues are at present clubbed with other issues like social and cultural cooperation (APF 2010). It was stated that the climate crisis poses a grave threat to the ASEAN region. In procedural terms, SAPA has called upon ASEAN to recognize and include seven crucial stakeholders including trade unions, non-governmental organizations and people’s movements in ASEAN policy making processes (SAPA 2006). Further, SAPA advocated the need for a social dialogue between the ASEAN and civil society organizations in the region as part of the ASEAN Economic Community.

In developing these concerted positions, the SAPA network draws from the collective wisdom of civil society organizations in the region that emphasize on research as a key resource for their advocacy works. Through developing alternative or critical knowledge, which deconstructs prevailing concepts, policies and practices related particularly to neoliberal economic globalization and its governance, these civil society organizations like SAPA publishes well argued research papers to support alternative governance arrangements that stresses upon social justice, ecological issues, and the economic rights of workers, local communities and marginalized groups. Therefore, fairly coherent ideas about alternative regional community building in Southeast Asia has emerged out of research based networking and activity through the SAPA network and in institutionalized public spaces like the ASEAN People’s Forum,
constituting a counter-hegemonic challenge to the dominant ASEAN framework based on conservatism, illiberal political governance and neoliberal economic policies (Nesadurai 2012: 175).

*Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN)*

Another significant civil society organization in the region with specific focus on Burma is the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, which was established in 1996 after the Alternative ASEAN Meeting on Burma at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. ALTSEAN is a network of individuals and organizations based in the member states of ASEAN working to support the movement for democracy and human rights inside Burma and it comprises of human rights and social justice non-governmental organizations, political parties, think tanks, academics, journalists as well as student activists. Although the activities of ALTSEAN are directed primarily towards restoring human rights and democracy inside Burma, they have also worked to support causes for human rights in other countries within the Southeast Asian region (Insight on Conflict 2013). It also works in cooperation and coordination with key groups outside the Southeast Asian region. After experiencing the manner in which the governments of the ASEAN member states have colluded with each other to suppress people’s rights, ALTSEAN targets ASEAN as a regional grouping to hold them accountable for the violations. This is the reason for which this network has been named as Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (Chak 2011). The political participation of women is a key aspect of ALTSEAN work as the organization considers it to be an essential element of democracy.

ALTSEAN is engaged in advocacy, campaigns and capacity building to establish a free and democratic Burma. The activists of ALTSEAN work with democracy movements and its supporters in order to produce resources for building and strengthening strategic relationships among key organizations from Burma, ASEAN and the international community. Another objective of ALTSEAN is to implement innovative strategies that are responsive to emerging needs and urgent developments. It is also engaged in inspiring and confidence building for empowerment among activists, particularly among women, youth and ethnic groups in Burma. However, one of the most important objectives of the ALTSEAN is to initiate ASEAN reforms that will uphold democracy and human rights among the member states, particularly inside
Burma. Since its inception in 1996, Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma has tried to contribute towards the process of achieving a democratic transition in Burma. One of the significant achievements of ALTSEAN so far has been its contribution towards multi-sectoral advocacy that has resulted in a breakthrough or a shift as far as ASEAN’s position on Burma was concerned (Insight on Conflict 2013). ALTSEAN is quite often called upon to brief legislators, legislative aides, diplomats, non-governmental organizations and other important decision makers on matters relating to Burma and ASEAN.

ALTSEAN comprises an extensive team of researchers from within its activists who read and analyze more than thousand news articles and reports per month. This information is used by the network to produce a variety of publications and materials including online resources. The main publication that is being periodically published by the research team of the organization is called the ‘Burma Bulletin’. The special reports and Burma Bulletin focuses on political, social and economic issues confronting the people of Burma and the Southeast Asian region at large. For example, the issue of drug trade in Burma has been a very serious political and social issue, having its ramifications not only inside Burma, but throughout the region at large. A special report prepared by the ALTSEAN has reviewed the manner in which the military led State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has maintained a long and deep involvement with major narcotics producing and trafficking syndicates either through direct participation or disinclination to curb their activities (ALTSEAN 2004: 1, 12-13). Sections within the Burmese military are known to be involved with major trafficking and drug syndicates for personal profit, corporate rent seeking as well as for maintaining regime security. Incidentally, Burma has become the world’s largest producer of illegal narcotics after Afghanistan. Changes to the drug trade in Burma with involvement of the country’s military regime have increasingly affected states in the region that have experienced greater drug consumption along with adverse effects on health and social disorder. Neighbouring Thailand and Cambodia have experienced considerable amount of social problems as a result of drug trade from Burma and these drugs and narcotics have started to appear in several other Southeast Asian states as well (ALTSEAN 2004: 125-127). Even, large consignment of these drugs is reported to be shipped to countries like Australia and the United States. Burma has also been designated as a country of prime money laundering concerns and all
of its financial institutions had been debarred from receiving any financial assistance or interaction from the United States government due to their deep involvement with drug trade.

The overall aim of a civil society based organization like ALTSEAN is to inform, train, energize and motivate people so that they can act and speak out for protecting their rights. As political, economic and security related issues are interconnected, they have a direct impact on the daily lives of the people in the region. The ALTSEAN activists have gained the skill and knowledge to promote human rights and democracy in very practical and innovative ways. The work of the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma has in a small way resulted in the empowerment of people to speak out and resist injustices (Chak 2011). It has also played an important role in encouraging the civil society based networks to engage with ASEAN and the governments of the ASEAN member states to push for ensuring greater human rights and democracy. The movement initiated by the ALTSEAN has at least resulted in more collaborative efforts on part of the civil society groups in the region and putting pressure on the regional governments to act in order to protect people’s rights.

Therefore, it can be seen from the above discussion that despite an increasing rhetorical commitment towards engagement with civil society, at the practical level, official ASEAN continues to resist the demand of the civil society organizations for its greater involvement in ASEAN processes of agenda setting, deliberation and decision making. This does not mean that there is total absence of any engagement between the ASEAN and the civil society organizations in the region. The participation by civil society groups has, however, been mostly confined to areas of functional utility to ASEAN, usually depoliticized to emphasize the technical expertise and grassroots familiarity of civil society organizations and local community groups and therefore helpful while addressing issues like rural development, HIV/AIDS, disaster relief, women and youth development. In reality, the preference of ASEAN as reflected in recent official documents appears to be for a civil society that will help ASEAN achieve the already established goals and projects of the ASEAN’s governing elite rather than a civil society that will assist ASEAN in setting these goals and agenda in the first place through genuine two-way communication (Nesadurai 2012: 175). The structures of the spaces sanctioned by the ASEAN elites for participation by the regional civil society actors demonstrates that those very spaces offer limited potential for the regional civil society organizations to contest ASEAN’s policy and
shape the official processes. There are several characteristics of these spaces that restrict the probable forms of participation by the civil society organizations.

First, there are strict controls over who can participate in these spaces (Gerard 2014b: 271). For example, in the case of annual sectoral forums, an informal system of affiliation operates, where civil society organizations that are deemed to have similar intentions as ASEAN can participate and engage with ASEAN. In this informal system of managing participation from civil society actors, government of each member state compiles a list of relevant organizations that they wish to participate. Each list is considered by the committee of permanent representatives and if any of the nominated civil society organizations are deemed contentious by a member state, they will be removed from the list by the ASEAN officials. Only those civil society organizations, which have been approved by the governments of the ten member states, will be allowed to interact with ASEAN elites and other officials, thereby making participation by civil society actors in these forums rather exclusive. As a result of these conditions, many of the participants are government organized non-governmental organizations (GONGO) as these organizations are established and maintained by the states. While the distinctions in nature and operation between a ‘GONGO’ and an autonomous civil society organization varies along with the degree of government control over the activities of such organizations, civil society organizations with a more contentious agenda and grassroot level civil society groups are not represented in ASEAN dominated forums (Gerard 2014b: 272). In many Southeast Asian states, several restrictions are placed on the activities of civil society groups, which focus on issues that are perceived as contentious by the governments of the member states of ASEAN. In countries like Cambodia, it could even result in the death of prominent civil society activists who are persistent in seeking the truth as was the case with Chut Wutty who had been gunned down while doing an investigation into illegal logging in a protracted area under mysterious circumstances (Radio Free Asia 2012). Cambodian government under Prime Minister Hun Sen is viewed by the civil society groups as anti-civil society and has been constantly under attack from human rights groups for what they call Cambodia’s dismal human rights records.

Second, there are strict controls over the nature of participation in these spaces for the civil society based actors that have been established or recognized by ASEAN. In 2012, as the chair of the ASEAN, Cambodian government tried to hijack the annual ASEAN Civil Society
Conference or the ASEAN People’s Forum meeting usually held in parallel with the ASEAN summits of heads of governments (Radio Free Asia 2012). In neighbouring Laos, demand from civil society groups have been ignored to shelve a controversial dam project on the Mekong river as companies in that country and Thailand forged ahead with an agreement for the dam’s construction. Third, spaces for civil society participation are also determined by the issue under discussion, which has put further limitations on the range of political activities pursued by the civil society organizations. Less contentious issues such as social welfare and development have been the subject of forums established to promote interaction between the ASEAN officials and the civil society organizations. However, civil society organizations, which focus on issues like human rights experience substantial difficulties in getting an audience with ASEAN officials as it was evident during the drafting of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration of 2012 (Gerard 2014b: 272-273). It is also interesting to note that civil society organizations like the ALTSEAN, which are working on more contentious issues like political reform in Burma, have been excluded from all the forums for civil society engagement that have been approved by the ASEAN elites. Finally, the lack of institutionalization of ASEAN sanctioned forms of political participation means that the ASEAN officials retain their power to sideline or exclude the activities of civil society organizations as and when they feel it necessary.

Therefore, these four features of the structure of sanctioned spaces for participation by the civil society actors have constrained the civil society organizations from utilizing those spaces for contesting the policies of the ASEAN elites and advancing alternative conflicting agenda. But inviting some of the civil society groups to contribute to the official discourse but limiting their ability to contest official ASEAN policy, participation by civil society organizations serves only to create legitimacy for ASEAN’s broader reform agenda (Gerard 2014b: 274). It is because of this that many civil society organizations in the region have started to pursue their agenda through ‘created spaces’, which has been discussed earlier in this chapter. The very restricted forms of participation permitted by the ASEAN elites through ASEAN sanctioned spaces has discouraged several civil society organizations from pursuing their activities for reform and alternative regionalism through these channels and instead, they are undertaking their activities through the ‘created spaces’.
While analyzing the nature of engagement between the ASEAN and the various civil society based organizations at the Track III level, it can be argued that the efforts towards community building undertaken by the ASEAN till date can only establish a community of the governing elites, not a community of the people (Dang 2009: 4). If the ASEAN elites want to create a community larger than that, which will involve the people of the region, ASEAN has to change from what it is at the present moment. If the ASEAN governing elites gradually loosen their control and provide more space to the civil society organizations in the decision making process, it might be possible to bring about such a change. After forty seven years of existence, ASEAN is regarded as the most successful established regional grouping in the developing world. But this staying power of ASEAN masks the absence of a clear vision for the imagined region of Southeast Asia, which gives importance to the interests of the people at large. It has achieved success in building cozy diplomatic relations that serve the interests and provide comfort to the political elites of the member states but accomplish little for its people. As an institution for regional community building, ASEAN is wanting in several respects, which have been discussed earlier. Its milestones have been alien to the people of the region, because it has proceeded with a very government oriented perspective and involved highly specialized groups (Chavez 2006: 8-9). However, there are also people and community issues involving ASEAN countries, and spaces to respond to these issues needs to be explored at the regional level.

Evaluating ASEAN’s elite based model of regional community building has led civil society and social movements to the conception of alternative regionalism, including efforts towards a kind of ASEAN that will serve the interests of the people of the region. Different actors in the Southeast Asian region including the various regional civil society groups have different ideas as to what alternative regionalism means to them in the context of ASEAN. But one common area of agreement among these non-state actors in the promotion of alternative people-centered regional community is the participation of people in the ASEAN’s policy making process at all levels (Chandra 2009: 12). The model of alternative regionalism must be based on the recognition of power, capacities and participation of people in the decision-making process beyond being targets of the benefits of regional integration. Processes, structures and mechanisms that constitute elements of alternative regionalism needs to incorporate the participation of different sectors of society, particularly civil society at all stages and with their
involvement in the formulation of such mechanisms for participation. Therefore, any scheme of alternative regionalism must serve the actual needs and interests of the people, not only of the states (Dano 2008: 65). Also, protection of the human rights and other fundamental freedoms of the people and ensuring people’s control over land, water, minerals and forest resources need to be an integral part of the alternative regionalism model. Alternative regionalism is guided by the framework of sustainable development based on the interlocking of economic, social and environmental aspects, which cannot be separated from each other (Dano 2008: 66).

Civil society groups in the region are increasingly calling for ASEAN to be more down-to-earth and inclusive in its efforts to determine and shape the system of governance in the region. In recent years, civil society’s attempts towards alternative regional community building in the imagined region of Southeast Asia has expanded considerably with new civil society organizations, networks and forums emerging to allow greater space for participation by civil society based actors in ASEAN related activities. In this context, different civil society based groups have different imaginations of regional communities for the Southeast Asian region, which can be seen from their diverse range of programmes and activities. ASEAN has also launched its relatively new principle of creating a people-oriented ASEAN Community instead of a people-centered ASEAN Community, which most of the civil society groups at the Track III level aspire for. But it is doubtful whether these initiatives on part of the ASEAN elites are sufficient enough to satisfy the demand of the wider civil society organizations for the ASEAN to adopt a more optimistic people-centered principle (Chandra 2009: 12). Further, as it has been discussed in detail earlier, ASEAN has also put in place several restrictions and stricter controls over the activities of civil society organizations in the region so that these civil society groups would not be in a position to effectively challenge or contest ASEAN’s policy. But the very nature and dynamics of engagement between the ASEAN and the various civil society groups at the Track III level gives ample proof of the presence of several alternative visions of regional communities on part of the civil society based actors, which is markedly different from ASEAN’s elite based idea of a regional community and the process of community building in the region. In spite of encountering several obstacles, the various civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region with their respective alternative imaginations of regional communities
are pursuing with their activities aimed at promoting a genuinely people-centered regional community and also are trying to reform and modify ASEAN’s elite centric regionalism.

References


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