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THE STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND CHALLENGES TO REDUCE THE THREATS OF TERRORISM[1]

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Except for Thailand which served as a buffer state between the British and French empires, all Southeast Asian countries have been products of European and American colonialism. Any Southeast Asianists with a good sense of history would readily acknowledge that the US's current global war on terrorism demonstrates some striking resemblance with its post-colonial war on communism. In these two instances, foreign policy makers in general, have viewed Southeast Asia in its generalities indistinguishable with other regions of the world. They appraised the complex socio-cultural, economic, and political realities of the region through a single, simplistic conceptual frame. Given the reckless and unsophisticated appreciation of the region, there have been an upsurge of self-described and self-proclaimed "terrorism experts" in nearly a decade who try to convince the world that Islamic militants in Southeast Asia as nothing more than an appendage of Al-Qaeda, rather than a phenomenon with significant and distinct home-grown elements.

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While terrorism is now seen as a global phenomenon after the 9/11 attack in the US, it was not seen as such and as dangerous having adverse consequences on civilian lives when hundreds of thousands of civilians perished from American bombs in its anti-communist war in Vietnam. Neither was it seen a terrorist act when more than 500,000 suspected communists died during American-supported Suharto's regime in Indonesia in 1965 nor when US supported Marcos to slaughter roughly 60,000 Muslims at the height of the regime's campaign against the separatist movement in early to mid-1970s.

War, insurgency, or acts of terrorism usually have their root causes at the local level. They are not just a military problem. They are primarily a socio-political and socio-economic problem. It is proper and correct therefore that the first of the four pillars of the United Nations's *Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy* focuses on conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. This places salient and important issues of development, good governance, human rights, and rule of law at the forefront in addressing political violence, specifically terrorism. The *Strategy* is apparently tied up with the achievement of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2015, a comprehensive strategy to counter the rise of violent militancy. Unless the MDGs are realized, the influence of groups that prey on peoples' social insecurity will remain if not rise over time.

An effective mode to rein violence is to place emphasis on combating and isolating an irrational ideology deemed unacceptable to human society. It is the type of ideology that aspires to seize political power in the name of religion or ethnicity. It is an ideology that is nostalgic for some imagined "pure" past or "golden age;" oppresses women and homophobic, and inflicts immense violence against civilians based on its notion of struggle that has to be fought between "us" and "them," "good" and "evil," of jihad, cosmic war, or Armageddon. This ideology breeds terrorists who cannot accept that human reason is far greater supreme to sacred.

Defeating this ideology and pushing it to the margin of humanity require not only the use of legitimate military or hard power but also the employment of political, economic and other forms of persuasion and pressures by state and non-state institutions. Soft power that deals humanely with societies, peoples' culture, traditions, life-ways, and ethos has to be utilized in as much as the intellectual and psychological dimensions of the terrorists' threat and counter terrorism are as important as its physical dimension.

Countering the ideology of extremist groups through soft power demands grass roots political mobilization – creating the necessary space for inclusive civil society groups especially in areas, that represent a flashpoint for grievance which are the most likely recruiting areas for militants, and in an environment that reproduces extremism and criminality. Political mobilization however presumes a degree of democracy, respects for human rights, and upholds the rule of law.

The region's diversity in terms of state system, type of regime, societal structure, stage of economic development, cultural framework, and breadth and depth of peoples'

activism, makes Southeast Asia an excellent case in which to interrogate the scope and limits as well as determine the quality of civil society.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Understanding civil society in Southeast Asia would give us a better appreciation how peoples' organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) would be able to contribute in mitigating if not eradicating the roots of terrorism in the region. Unlike in Europe or in North America where civil society is highly distinguishable from the state, civil society in Southeast Asia is less distinct. Schak and Hudson argue that civil society in Asia needs to be examined in dynamic terms, as its configuration and shape is determined by political changes that transpire in each state. They find that the dividing line between public and private spheres is blurred; the state plays a central, if not domineering role, in the formation and establishment of civil society organizations (CSOs). They are not just "autonomous non-state voluntary organizations" (2003: 3-4) but also intricately intertwined with the power and function of the state. The independence of CSOs from the state is therefore dubious.

Johan Saravanamuttu agrees with the findings of Schak and Hudson with his own survey of civil societies across the region. He declares that they are weak compared to the power of the state because they "have had their incipient features shaped primarily by the economic milieu engendered by a dominant state structure," rather than having grown organically out of politics (1997:2). Ben Kerkvliet says that while there are several budding and emerging CSOs in Vietnam, they continue to be highly constrained by the state. In spite of their peaceful advocacies for reforms in government institutions, laws, and communication and media, they are not allowed to criticize Communist Party leaders or officials, the military, and national policies, and thus cannot be unreservedly "political" lest they lose what space they have (Kerkvilet 2003: 15-16).

David Brown and David Martin Jones declare that the dominant party regime in Singapore has effectively restrained the possibility of bourgeois demands for political participation and liberal values of the middle class by successfully co-opting and accommodating it within the parameters of the state. This renders the process of democratization in illiberal democratic Singapore "the expansion of political participation and consultation within the limits defined by the state" rather than the project of an adversarial civil society. (Brown and Jones 1995: 84; also Jones and Brown 1994). In a later study of Jones, he finds out that a "modular civil society" – one premised on the differentiation of political and socioeconomic spheres – is not emerging in the region but a "political change reflects a conservative, managerial strategy to

amplify political control by forging a new relationship with an *arriviste* middle class (1998: 163).

The proliferation of NGOs since the 1980s until late 1990s in Malaysia allowed them to perform a central role in both electoral and informal politics. The active participation of NGOs in politics outside the state pressured the latter to open a wider democratic space notwithstanding the presence of institutional constraints that inhibit the promotion of human rights and advancement of the rule of law – less independent judiciary, controlled media, and employment of the Internal Security Act (ISA), among others. Francis Loh (2003) argues that Malaysians disillusioned with political parties and electoral politics precipitated CSOs to engage in informal politics. The political mobilization of CSOs did not only offer the venues for participation outside the channels of electoral politics, but also allowed them to work with opposition political parties that eventually helped "to enrich those parties as well as hasten the process of political reform" (see also Weiss 2006). However, Saliha Hassan (2002) warns that NGOs need to beware of both exclusionary tendencies and state co-optation to enjoy the expanding space for democratic participation,

Gerard Clarke's (1998) in-depth study of the Philippines notes that NGOs both strengthen and weaken civil society. He illustrates how state-civil society collaboration fortifies the state and expands civil society political participation. His study shows that civil society is less concerned with its autonomy from the state when they can achieve their objectives through a strategic alliance with the state.

Indonesia, according to Robert Hefner, is as an Islamic state that supports "democracy, voluntarism, and a balance of countervailing powers in a state and society" (2000: 12-13). He notes the emergence of a Habermasian public sphere in Muslim Indonesia by highlighting "civil pluralist Islam." Further he says that:

> … this democratic Islam insists that formal democracy cannot prevail unless government power is checked by strong civic organisations. At the same time… civil associations and democratic culture cannot thrive unless they are protected by the state that respects society by upholding its commitment to the rule of law." (2000:13).

He nonetheless attributes the current weakness of civil society to the past predatory character of Sukarno's Guided Democracy and Suharto's New Order regime, rather than to political culture.

Without further exploring the character of civil society in relation to regime type in other Southeast Asian countries, due to limited time, it can be said that, overall, civil society in the region may not be so consistently a force for democratization or so staunchly independent of the state as most Western literature presumes, yet may still be an important space, among others, for political engagement and transformation. This recalibration of the concept "civil society" offers a clearer lens on the notion of civil society-state nexus in the region more generally. Furthermore, Alagappa concludes, among others, in his volume *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia* (2004) that Asian civil societies bear features of both neo-Tocquevillian/liberal democratic (associational) and neo-Gramscian/New Left (cultural and ideological frames with the former gaining ascendancy as state institutions gain legitimacy.

Although there has been a proliferation of civil society organizations, it has not resulted in the institutionalization of non-state public sphere. CSOs generally have not established themselves as independent and autonomous entity from the state but are seen more instrumentally for its fostering or preventing political change, which I think is positive enough. While CSOs have limited the power and reach of the (still-strong) state on the one hand, and extended their influence and impact in communities where the state is weak on the other hand, the interactions between these two spheres may not be confrontational, but vary significantly in contemporary Asia.

CIVIL SOCIETY: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIES

It is generally argued that due to an increasing incidence of weak state and state failure, where state's functions have atrophied, and the continuing decline in state participation in development policies, due to state's emphasis on and preoccupation with market liberalisation and subscription to the doctrine of neo-liberalism, CSOs have become more active in the space once occupied by the state. CSOs are thought to be able to "democratise" the development process, to reconstruct or build civil society, to deliver services more efficiently than the state can, are seen to have greater legitimacy because they work directly with beneficiaries, and to strengthening development models offered both by the state and the private sector.

It is important to understand that civil society is about participation. It is complementary, not a rival, to parliamentary democracy or representative democracy. And participatory democracy goes together with representative democracy. The civic politics of citizen participation and party or parliamentary politics of representation have a healthy dynamic of both complementarity and tension. Citizen participation carries its own legitimacy; it does not need to borrow its legitimacy from representation, not even to any institutions or instrumentalities of government. Its legitimacy emanates from what it does. Although CSOs are neither elected, thus not accountable to the

electorate, nor have any contractual relationship with the governed and cannot claim any form of representation, their limitations constitute a "comparative advantage" since their sense of "independence," in whatever manner or form give them relative freedom, flexibility, and space imperative in national and global good governance.

The legitimacy of CSOs and their networks are bolstered and buttressed by the validity and integrity of their ideas, by the values and interests they promote, and by the issues and programmes they care about. CSOs are important and invaluable to every society, regardless of regime and state system not because they "represent the people" but because they fill in the socio-economic and political vacuum of governance, and through them society and polity can get things done better either by offering an alternative system of delivering public goods and services or providing unorthodox strategies in achieving development goals and objectives.

CSOs are not only effective agents and facilitators of change agents but also effective institutions in mitigating politico-cultural exclusion and socio-economic marginalization of the poor. In least developed and developing countries where the poor are more often than not disempowered, underpowered, least consulted from the decision-making process that most matter their lives and future, and have limited access to services and information, CSOs can play an important role in helping building communities and facilitate the capacity of peoples' organizations to achieve their community-relevant goals. This intermediary role, in spite of its limitation, played by many CSOs is very complex, tedious, and often politically sensitive, but potentially quite constructive.

In terms of inter- and intra-regional cooperation, CSO activities in the Asian region have increased substantially over the last two decades, and they have become more important specifically in human security issues – poverty alleviation, environmental protection, human, drug, and arms trafficking, prostitution, money laundering, and terrorism, among others. CSOs must be seen as one of the most important linkages between regional, sub-regional, and national institutions on the one hand, and individuals at the grassroots. CSOs and CSO networks in Asia also cross geo-politically bounded terms such as 'East Asia', 'Southeast Asia' and 'South Asia', participating in region-wide networks so as to address transnational issues related ethnic minorities, refugees, HIV Aids, post-conflict reconciliation, landmines, and disabled rehabilitation and training more effectively.

Apart from the increase in number of development-oriented CSOs, there is also a well-documented increase the size and density of interactions between CSOs and international development agencies and organisations. The upsurge of "partnership" in terms of conceptualising, implementing, managing, and monitoring of projects has, in particular, indicated a move towards involving grassroots stakeholders in many aspects of human and community development projects. In part, this shift can be attributed to the acknowledgement that peoples' participation in community projects is crucial for project sustainability because it heightens a greater sense of ownership in the in internalising the attainment of development goals. A related concern is that through

greater participation, people and communities are empowered by their experiences and are able to build personal, community, and institutional capacity to meet their needs which they see as relevant, responsive, and appropriate.

CSOs are also active in forging international networks – cutting across national boundaries, ethnicities, ideologies, regimes, and social systems – for purposes of advocacy and campaigning, with the state, private sector and communities on issues of human rights, rule of law, transparency, accountability, and democracy. They can provide an enabling framework in which communities at the local level can assume a more active and meaningful role in their own and other peoples' development at the international level.

Given the illustrious contribution of CSOs in national and international development, it is also worthwhile to cite that the phenomenal rise of civil society in the region is rooted in the combined history of repressive regimes and dictatorships in Southeast Asian countries and with the influx of western donors which have trained their aids and funds toward anti-corruption, good governance and democratisation programmes within the global development agenda. The increased interest in the role of civil society has itself contributed to the perspective that CSOs can collectively strengthen and construct a sphere which will insulate society from a return to the intrusive and interventionist state.

Finally, I wish to emphasize that any lasting and durable counter-terrorism strategy has to deal with the following development concerns in Southeast Asia. Briefly, these are in the areas of:

- Education. Collier's (2000) study shows that the presence of a high proportion of uneducated young men in society increases the risk of conflict, whereas the greater educational endowment lowers the risk by around 20 per cent each year. The provision of universal primary education would be very important in reducing the incentive to send children to schools especially religious schools which have been historically served as breeding ground of extremists.

As regards to the role of education, it is vital for civil society and NGOs to explain that human rights and rule of law are a useful framework for developing effective counter- terrorism strategies rather than an impediment. Towards this effort, specific activities may include providing information to school students as well as to youth workers and police and law enforcement officials on the provisions of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant laws and statutes that protect and defend basic civil, political, and cultural rights. CSOs and NGOs may enter into partnerships with law enforcement bodies to develop targeted

programmes of co-operation, focusing, for instance, on increasing awareness and understanding of the diversity of communities;

- Media. There needs to be much greater investment in private, rather than state media – print, broadcast (radio and TV). In Serbia and some parts of African, independent community radio is especially important in countering extremist propaganda;

- Welfare. This has to be focused on health, social services, housing, and other humanitarian assistance especially for the least-abled (physical and psychological) individuals.; and

- Jobs. Development needs to give priority to legitimate ways for these young people to make a sustained and dignified source of living.Unemployed or criminalized young men are the main breeding ground for extremist ideologies.

- Governance, democracy, and poverty reduction. CSOs need to engage proactively with marginalized communities on issues of good governance, protection and defense of civil, political, and cultural rights, and multilateral and inter-disciplinary approaches to poverty reduction and social justice. The engagement on these issues is extremely important thereby denying governments a monopoly over the debates on socio-economic and politico-cultural concerns. This engagement is essential for ensuring the "softer" and less militaristic approach to counterterrorism reflected in Strategy takes root on ground.

Member states should support more CSO involvement in counterterrorism debates and activities at the global, regional, and national level. For example, the 15 members of the UN Counter- Terrorism Committee could follow the precedent of the 1540 Committee and hold a full day session to allow civil society groups to contribute to a review of efforts to implement Security Council Resolution 1373.

Any actions therefore taken to deal with terrorism have to be undertaken within the framework of equitable and lasting development and good governance, and have to be aimed at countering the ideology of 'fear and hatred' with a genuine effort to win 'hearts and minds'. And the participation of the civil society towards this direction is not a matter of choice but a mandate; a task that needs to be unreservedly fulfilled.

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