

INTRODUCTION: Trajectories of Civil Society in Asia

Democratic backsliding is a major concern worldwide and Asia is no exception. Freedom House, a U.S. independent watchdog dedicated to the expansion of democracy across the world released its flagship report, the Freedom in the World 2022, earlier this year claiming that global democracy has declined for the 16th consecutive year.

‘The leaders of China, Russia and other dictatorships have succeeded in shifting global incentives, jeopardising the consensus that democracy is the only viable path to prosperity and security, while encouraging more authoritarian approaches to governance’, the report states.

According to the report, in the Asia-Pacific region, political rights and civil liberties declined as authoritarian forces moved to consolidate their power.

In his recent book, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency* (2019), Larry Diamond at Stanford University points out the ways in which undemocratic states strengthen their rule through what he calls ‘the autocrats’ 12-step program’.

As one of these steps, Diamond argues that an autocratic state ‘subdues other elements of civil society—civic associations, universities and especially anticorruption and human rights groups—by painting them as part of the arrogant, effete, selfish elite that have betrayed the people and the country’.

However, civil society continues to powerfully reject authoritarianism.

An encouraging example is that this year’s Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to civil society—human rights advocate Ales Bialiatski from Belarus, the Russian human rights organisation Memorial and the Ukrainian human rights organisation Center for Civil Liberties—for combatting non-democratic regimes.

When asked about the significance of this year’s award, Berit Reiss-Andersen, Chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, stated ‘What we would like to address with this prize is the importance of civil society and the efforts made by individuals whom we usually name human rights activists, people who work for [the] rule of law, and anti-

militarist movements... What we like to show is the importance of civil societies and the choices of individuals to stand up against injustices, against war and for these values that I just described’.

While congratulating the winners, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres released a statement maintaining that ‘Civil society groups are the oxygen of democracy, and catalysts for peace, social progress and economic growth. They help keep governments accountable and carry the voices of the vulnerable into the halls of power’.

Civil society indeed plays an important role in contemporary democracies. However, accounts of civil society in Asia lag behind many studies on economic and political interconnections. Meanwhile, there are deepening ties and interdependencies within and between the regions of Asia owing to globalisation and the growth of regional organisations.

The University of Melbourne’s Asia Institute Research Cluster on Asian Civil Society is a new research hub in the field, collaborating with the members of the Asian Civil Society Research Network.

In addition to the previous *Melbourne Asia Review* issues on civil society (here and here), the research groups published three edited volumes, *Routledge Handbook of Civil Society in Asia* (2017), *Transnational Civil Society in Asia: The Potential of Grassroots Regionalization* (2021) and *Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Asia* (2022) along with *Asian Studies Review* special issue on human rights and civil society in Asia and a documentary film ‘Civil Society and War Reconciliation: Rethinking History to Embrace Memory – Voices from Post-war Japan, Germany and Italy’ (2019, directed by Claudia Astarita, Akihiro Ogawa, and Hiroko Aihara – members of the Asian Civil Society Research Network).

Edition 12 of *Melbourne Asia Review* further expands our accounts on Asian civil society. Emerging scholars, including seven Ph.D. students at the University of Melbourne, are expanding the scholarship through their ongoing research from field sites in Japan, China, Philippines, Indonesia, India and Turkey.

These contributions illustrate two distinctive, polarised developments that we can observe in the context of civil society in Asia.

On the one hand, articles on Japan (Akina Mikami, Adam Eldridge-Imamura, Kiyomi Misaki, Scott Musgrave-Takeda and Ruby Ramsden) along with two accounts from

the Philippines (Syme de Leon and David Lozada), and one from Turkey (Ahmet Bekmen) present the rich civil society landscape in Asian countries, mainly focusing on social movements.

All show that civil society shapes new terms of political debate, thereby enhancing democracy. Civil society infuses new ideas and grassroots insights into governance and even helps to generate new policy paradigms and practice.

For instance, Eldridge-Imamura draws on his fieldwork in Japan observing the progress of the Unconstitutional Security Legislation Litigation Association's (USLLA) campaign following the Shinzo Abe government's Peace and Security Legislation in 2015. The author, who is a lawyer currently seeking a PhD, contributes to the long-running debate on the effectiveness of strategic litigation as a tool for civil society groups to achieve social change.

Furthermore, observing civil society under the Rodrigo Duterte regime in the Philippines, de Leon examines how human rights organisations have grappled with anti-human rights mobilisations with a particular focus on how they contribute to producing counter-, or alternative, affective discourses on human rights and its implications.

On the other hand, this issue also presents cases of civil society's survival in ongoing difficulties in China, Indonesia, India and Bangladesh (Di Wu, Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir, Ananya Pattnaik and Sarbeswar Sahoo, and Seuty Sabur). We see the developments led by groups categorised as 'uncivil society'—a phenomenon which is a major concern among scholars specialising in civil society who view it as space for undermining democratic participation.

Wu provides an update on Chinese NGOs' situation under the Chinese Communist Party's 'zero-COVID' policy, arguing that three years into the pandemic, NGOs were becoming vulnerable and marginalised as the Chinese government maintained a restrictive and repressive approach to their work.

Citing Indonesian cases, Mughis points out that the rise of uncivil society in the context of authoritarian politics undermines the theory that civil society always bolsters democracy.

Sabur reports from Bangladesh that there has been a relentless rise in gender and religious identity-based, 'uncivil society' over the past decade, but that a radical politics is still being advanced by women's organisations where possible.

The discussion was continued at a December conference—Civil Society in Asia 4: International Conference in Melbourne. Most of the authors in this issue presented updated accounts during the conference.