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CIVIL SOCIETY & ETHNIC CONFLICT

- A Comparative Case Analysis of Civil Society & Ethnic Conflict in Thailand & Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The importance of civil society for advancing peace efforts and outcomes generated increased and wide interest after the Cold war. During this era the number of armed intra-state and violent ethnic conflicts also increased dramatically. In Southeast Asia only Malaysia has avoided intra-state conflict and recurring ethnic violence. Thailand constitutes a typical regional case with prolonged and recurring intra-state and ethnic conflicts. The aim of this study therefore was to contrast and explain the role of civil society in relation to ethnic conflict in Thailand and Malaysia. A comparative case analysis was applied across four analytical dimensions: space, structure, values, impact. Our study demonstrated that coercive regimes have suppressed civil society and communities remain intra-ethnic in both countries. Although civil society is weakened in both cases inter-ethnic government policies have secured ethnic peace over five decades in Malaysia, whereas the absence of similar policies has prolonged ethnic violence in Thailand.

Keywords: Civil society; Ethnicity; Ethnic conflict; Intra-state conflict;
Thailand; Malaysia; Southeast Asia.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of the Southeast Asian Nations
CSI	Civil Society Index
HRW	Human Rights Watch
NF	National Front
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
SEA	Southeast Asia
UN	United Nations

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Cold war armed inter-state conflicts decreased globally, while armed intra-state conflicts increased dramatically. During the 1990s more than ninety percent of all existing armed conflicts were classified as civil wars (Paris, 2004: 1). With the eruption of ethnic wars in Europe, Asia and Africa the role of ethnicity was also singled out as a central factor for armed conflict in the post Cold war era (Joireman, 2003: 1). In light of these developments the international community and a wide spectrum of research fields turned their attention towards intra-state conflict resolution and management. With the fall of communism and a number of other coinciding changes, such as the emergence of new democracies, increased global interaction in a growingly insecure world, and a significant increase of NGOs globally, focus was widely turned towards the role of civil society as an important element or partner in intra-state peace building processes (Edwards, 2004: 2). In short, numerous politicians, scholars and practitioners around the world anticipated that civil society would be of central importance for the initiation and sustainability of peace processes. As a concept civil society can be depicted as a societal sphere positioned between the individual and the state wherein non-governmental and non-profit activities and values of civility are practiced (Belloni, 2001: 168). As civil society widely was endorsed as a vital sphere for democratization processes, the rule of law, and the respect for human rights it was thereby anticipated that ethnically divided societies would achieve sustainable peace through civil society (Belloni, 2001: 163).

During history the importance and characteristics of civil society have been examined and disputed by numerous Western philosophers and social scientists. The importance of civil society in societies outside the Western world however has not generated similar quantities of research (Edwards, 2004: 10). Asia is the most populous continent on the planet, and most civil wars in Asia are found in Southeast Asia (Möller, DeRouen, Bercovitch, Wallenstein, 2007: 376). With the development of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) the probability of armed conflicts between the nations in the region was significantly reduced (Rüland, 2005: 546). Similar progress has not been achieved regarding intra-state conflict resolution (Vatikiotis, 2006: 29), as civil wars in Southeast Asia tend to be prolonged and re-emergent (Möller et al, 2007: 376). A recent example concerns the re-emergence and intensification of the internal conflict in Southern Thailand. Between January 2004 and July 2007 more than 2400 people lost their lives in this conflict, and more than four thousand people were injured (HRW, 2007: 5). Shootings occur daily, and bomb attacks and beheadings take place weekly (Melvin, 2007: 5-6). In neighbouring Malaysia such intra-state conflicts have never erupted. Malaysia has instead managed to avoid prolonged and re-emerging violent ethnic conflicts (Reynal-Querol, 2002: 29-30). In this study our aim therefore was to comparatively elucidate and explain the role of civil society in relation to ethnic conflict in Thailand and Malaysia.

1.1 Research Aim

The purpose of the study was to explore, contrast and explain the roles of civil society in relation to ethnic conflict in Thailand and Malaysia. Our main research questions were:

- What characterizes civil society in Thailand in contrast to civil society in Malaysia?
- Why and how has Malaysia managed to avoid recurring violent ethnic conflicts, whereas Thailand has failed to prevent recurring ethnic conflicts?
- What roles has civil society had in relation to ethnic conflict in Thailand and in Malaysia?

1.2 Delimitations

Our study was limited by factors such as resources, time and space. The aim of this study therefore was not to specifically evaluate the state of civil society in Thailand or Malaysia, nor was the purpose to conduct extensive analyses of ethnic conflict in the two cases. Evaluating civil society would have required field based primary data collection, as secondary data regarding civil society for these two cases is severely limited. Extensive ethno-demographic data thus was also not applied in this study. The aspects of ethnicity and conflict were rather applied in relation to the roles of civil society.

1.3 Disposition

This study further contains five main sections. The subsequent section encompasses introductory theoretical perspectives regarding civil society, ethnicity and conflict. Research design, analytical model and data collection approaches are presented in the following method section. In the third section civil society and ethnic conflict in the applied cases are presented separately. Civil society and ethnic conflict in Thailand and Malaysia are respectively categorized and outlined. This descriptive section is followed by a comparative case analysis. Here the roles of civil society in relation to ethnic conflict in Thailand and Malaysia are explained and compared analytically. In the final section broader lessons and conclusions regarding civil society and ethnic conflict are discussed.

2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Defining Civil Society

Conceptualizations of civil society have engaged philosophers since classical antiquity, but civil society concepts have only recently reached the international centre stage. As mentioned above several developments leading up to the end of the Cold war and various streams in the following post Cold war era widely revived the interest for civil society. Despite its ambiguity civil society was upheld in considerably different circles and circumstances across the political spectrum (Kaldor, 2003: 2). Today civil society is commonly described as a sphere of voluntary collective activity encompassing shared interests, purpose, and values of civility (Pouligny, 2005: 497). This sphere is furthermore distinguished from state, market, and family institutions. These boundaries are however blurred, complex and negotiated in reality as civil society encircles a wide range of spaces, actors and institutional forms (Pouligny, 2005: 497). After all, people can at once be citizens, consumers, workers and voters (Edwards, 2004: 24). Although civil society is a multifaceted phenomenon the organization “Civicus” (World Alliance for Citizen Participation) has managed to conduct path breaking studies of civil society in more than twenty countries (Keane, 2003: 4). According to this organization civil society can be defined as *“the sphere of institutions, organizations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests”* (Holloway, 2001: 6). Additionally it is also necessary to yet again repeat that neither civil society nor the different sectors of society are isolated phenomena (see Fig.1). They are rather inter-connected in their efforts to promote civility (Holloway, 2001: 7).

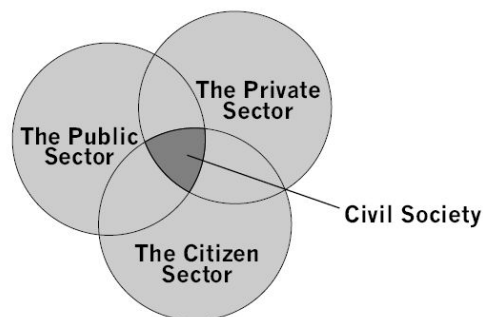


Fig.1. Civil society as an overlapping and inter-connected sphere within the sectors of society.

Source: Holloway, 2001: 7.

The multifaceted perceptions of civil society furthermore stem from the conceptual variations of civil society over time (Kaldor, 2003: 16). Since classical antiquity philosophers have referred to civil society in discourses surrounding the

nature of the good society, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the practise of politics and government, and how individual autonomy ought to be balanced with collective needs (Edwards, 2004; 6). Philosopher G.W.F Hegel argued that civil society is not a pre-given “natural” expression of freedom, but rather a historically constructed sphere of ethical life that includes the economy, social classes, corporations and institutions (Keane, 1998: 50). According to Hegel civil society could not provide stability and social harmony autonomously, as the multitude of interactions and contestations in civil society could as well lead to violent conflicts. Hegel thus underlined that the modern state was a necessary regulator of civil society (Keane, 1998: 50). Hegel separated the state and family from civil society, but he did not distinguish the market economy from civil society. Philosopher Antonio Gramsci in contrast made this distinction, and further argued that civil society is a sphere between the state and a class-structured economy (Keane, 1998: 15). According to Gramsci civil society was upheld by cultural institutions – such as voluntary associations, schools and universities, media and churches. Through these civil society institutions, Gramsci argued, the state maintains its hegemonic position by socializing its ideology and values among the working class, and thereby securing popular consent (Kaldor, 2003: 21). At the same time Gramsci upheld that civil society is not always a sphere of hegemonic state control, but also as a potential powerful site for rebellion against the coercive state. This rebellion could be conducted by activism through the cultural institutions in civil society (Kaldor, 2003: 21; Edwards, 2004: 8). Hegel and Gramsci thus underlined advantages as well as risks with civil society. In the post Cold war era the more contemporary concepts of civil society have primarily elevated advantageous aspects of civil society. Most of these concepts refer to the works of historian Alexis de Tocqueville. As Edwards (2004: 10) writes: “It is Alexis de Tocqueville’s ghost that wanders through the halls of the World bank...”. According to de Tocqueville individual liberties and the good society could only be safeguarded through so called “democratic expedients” (Kaldor, 2003: 19). These included local self-government, the separation of church and state, a free press, indirect elections, an independent judiciary and so called associational life. De Tocqueville referred to associational life as the networks in civil life that people could join to provide different services and cultural activities. These civil activities would reduce the influence of the centralizing institutions and enable a check on state power, which in turn would protect pluralism and equality (Kaldor, 2003: 19-20).

The mentioned philosophical accounts in various ways integrate or differentiate civil society in relation to state structures. Researchers Mary Kaldor (2003) and John Kean (2003) however argue that the growing importance of globalization ought to be incorporated in current conceptualizations of civil society. Individual autonomy, self-organization and private space did not only become important values and goals during the end of communism in Europe, but across the globe authoritarian states were challenged (Kaldor, 2003: 4). As global interconnectedness grew during this era the boundaries of civil society thereby began to erode (Kaldor, 2003: 5). For example, the number of international NGOs

has risen dramatically and it's estimated that these organizations disburse more capital than the UN (Keane, 2003: 5). The notion of civility furthermore varies across cultures. This does not only underline that global civil society is socially constructed, but the social interactions, dimensions and impacts of civil society stretch beyond the state centric Western conceptualizations of civil society (Keane, 2003: 12; 19-21).

2.2 Ethnicity & Conflict

In the late 1990s there were 5000 ethnic groups living in the world's 184 independent nations (Kymlicka, 1998: 9). Tolerance between ethnic groups can be challenged over matters such as autonomy, language rights, education, national symbols and political representation (Kymlicka, 1998: 9), but violent ethnic conflicts are rare as most ethnic groups strive for rights and progress without violent means (Joireman, 2003: 1). Violent ethnic conflicts such as in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland although underline the importance of conceptualizing ethnicity.

Many subjective factors contribute to the formation of ethnic identities. Culture, memories and a sense of solidarity all play a role in ethnicity constructions, and these factors variously determine the variable combinations of identities that are prioritized and socialized (Joireman, 2003: 10). Individuals can form their ethnicity based on a few or several different identities. The construction of ethnicities can thus be based on various identities such as religion, language, race, regional belonging, and customs. Ethnicities are not constant phenomena. Ethnicities can disappear over time and be assimilated into larger groups, but ethnicities can also re-emerge – such as the revitalization of Maya identity in Central America (Joireman, 2003: 57-58). Ethnic groups can additionally be constructed due to other groups' categorizations. This can occur when groups are blamed for social ills or are singled out as “others” in order to authorize or enable socioeconomic inequalities, which regularly took place during colonialism (Joireman, 2003: 64). Ethnicity is not a distinct phenomenon, nor is it intrinsically a cause of war. Most ethnic conflicts are conducted through political institutions and channels. Violence however can become a factor when struggles or competition between ethnic groups are repositioned outside the political arena (Joireman, 2003: 146).

2.3 Linking Civil Society & Ethnic Conflict

Civil society is widely upheld as a multidimensional sphere of civility and non-violence, but civil society can also contain pockets of incivility (Keane, 2003: 12-13). Systematic studies of probable links between civil society and ethnic conflict

however are limited. The research by political scientist Ashutosh Varshney (2001: 362) in multicultural communities in India represents a first attempt to establish research grounded links between civil society and ethnic conflict.

Varshney (2001: 366) differentiates between ethnic conflict and ethnic violence. As was introduced above ethnic conflicts exist in all plural societies due to contestations over e.g. political rights, material needs or space. Ethnic conflicts that take on institutionalized forms – e.g. parliament representation or nonviolent activism – are therefore distinguished from ethnic violence. When ethnic conflicts move outside institutional spheres violence can erupt in various forms and intensity – e.g. race riots, intra-state conflicts or civil wars. From this perspective Varshney (2001: 365) applies the term ethnic peace. Ethnic peace is thus not the absence of conflict, but the absence of ethnic violence.

In order to clarify the links between civil society and ethnic conflict Varshney (20001: 363) differentiates between two opposite forms of civil society: inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic associational forms of engagement. Inter-ethnic engagement is perceived as peace building and fostering of tolerance. In such inter-ethnic communities different ethnic groups coexist and interact peacefully. In these spheres of tolerance inter-ethnic communities are tied together through everyday activities and interactions, and thus the probability of ethnic violence is reduced. Intra-ethnic forms of association however are less successful in breaking down negative stereotypes between ethnic groups. In these communities people foremost interact within their own ethnic group. This tends to reinforce negative stereotypes and increases the risk of hostilities between ethnic groups (Varshney, 2001: 375). The probability of ethnic peace thereby increases if civil society is composed by inter-ethnic interactions and engagements.

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Design

Previous research publications regarding civil society in SEA are scarce, which limited the availability of specific secondary data for this study. With such obstacles in mind a qualitative comparative case analysis was selected for this study. With explorative and explanatory ambitions in depth rather than in width a most similar system design therefore was applied. From a broad perspective Thailand and Malaysia can be classified as two similar countries in terms of their political systems, civil society and ethnic divisions. The records for ethnic peace in these two cases however are indisputably opposite. When the comparative similarities between selected cases are uncertain this design can also be applied in a reversed fashion, if the outcome in differences is known beforehand (Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson, Wängnerud, 2007: 115). This research design thereby equipped us with a methodological frame by which it was possible to comparatively discuss and draw conclusions as a trade-off between specifics of the applied cases and generalizations for other cases.

3.2 Analytical Model

Analyzing civil society is a complicated task as civil society encompasses a multitude of interactions and dimensions. Analysis models and measurements of civil society thereby are limited. As was mentioned above the organization “Civicus” however has conducted systematic studies of civil society in more than twenty countries (Keane, 2003: 4) – Thailand and Malaysia were not part of this research. In these studies the so called Civil Society Index (CSI) was applied. This index was developed by Civicus for extensive studies of civil society across four analytical dimensions (Holloway, 2001: 35): *structure; space; values; impact*. The CSI was not applied in this study, as the CSI was developed for extensive primary data collection studies. As these CSI-dimensions are validated for studies of civil society we nevertheless chose to ground our comparative case analysis in these dimensions. The four dimensions are introduced below.

The structure dimension includes the make up of civil society: size, composition and the sources of support (Anheier, 2004: 32). The main focus in this dimension is to examine the actors within civil society, their characteristics and the relationship between them.

The space or environment dimension covers the legal, political and socio-cultural space in which civil society functions (Holloway, 2001: 37). In this dimension laws, policies and social norms that enable or inhibit civil society are

thus studied. This dimension is also of central importance for understanding the relationship between the state and civil society (Anheier, 2004: 32).

The value dimension encompasses the principles, values and attitudes that are practised and promoted by civil society (Anheier, 2004: 32). This dimension can reveal if e.g. democratic values are in fact grounded in a society, which in turn reflects the legitimacy and credibility of civil society.

The impact dimension is finally applied for assessments of the societal influence of civil society. In this dimension the contributions and impact of civil society regarding social, economic and political problems are studied (Holloway, 2001: 39).

3.3 Data Collection

In this study predominantly research articles and secondary data publications were applied. In order to obtain relevant and recent research literature regarding our study aim extensive electronic database searches were conducted. The primary databases for this study were: ELIN – the Lund university catalogue of research journals; LOVISA – the Lund university library catalogue, and LIBRIS – the Swedish national academic library catalogue. Initially a general search word approach was applied – e.g. “civil society”, “Malaysia”, “ethnic conflict”. Abstracts and full text versions of relevant articles were selected and read, and thereafter new search sessions followed. In the following search sessions more specific key word combinations were applied – e.g. “intra-ethnic”, “Southern Thailand”, “insurgency”. These search sessions were repeated until a sufficient quantity of research publications were obtained.

4 CIVIL SOCIETY & ETHNIC CONFLICT

4.1 Ethnicity & Conflict in Thailand

Thailand is a multicultural society. Throughout history Thai rulers however have officially classified Thailand as a homogenous country (Pongsapich, 1998: 302). Even today minority policy does not exist as an official political concept in Thailand (Raendchen, 2004: 165). Although the Thai ethnic group is the majority group there are many other minority groups in Thailand with different socio-cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Northern Thailand is inhabited by Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer and Lao ethnic groups, while Southern Thailand is inhabited by Malay ethnic groups (Raendchen, 2004: 165). The urban centres in Thailand are also inhabited by large populations of Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese ethnic groups. During Thai nation building the heterogeneous ethnic composition of society was perceived as a threat to the stability, security and development of the Thai nation state (Raendchen, 2004: 165). Nationalistic policies therefore became embedded in most aspects of society – e.g. education and language, local administration, development policy and security.

The lack of minority policy in Thailand can be traced back to at least two main historic circumstances. National integration was regarded as essential for the establishment of actual borders between the Thai Kingdom of Siam and colonial French Indochina (Raendchen, 2004: 165). The second reason was the fear of separatist movements in the North-east region. Here one part of the Lao population, which was settled on both banks of the Mekong-river, had become integrated under the Thai kingdom. The Lao is the largest ethnic minority in Thailand, as they constitute about 16.5 million people (Raendchen, 2004: 166). Separatist movements during the 20th century however have foremost erupted in Southern Thailand.

In the three southern provinces of Thailand – Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat – violent insurgencies erupted in 2004. Violence occurs on a daily basis. Hit-and-run attacks are frequent, as well as bombings and beheadings (HRW, 2007: 72, 84). Thousands of schools have also been systematically targeted and burnt down. This intra-state conflict however is not a recent conflict. Since the 1960s more than sixty armed groups have been active in this separatist movement (Melvin, 2007: 1). During the 1980s many insurgence leaders were given amnesty, and the region became more stable until the intra-state conflict remerged in 2004. Local ethnic groups have however not always been separated along ethnic lines in Southern Thailand. Local ethnic groups used to coexist peacefully, and sometimes ethno-religious systems, through ceremonies and rituals, were even blended among the different ethnic groups (Horstmann, 2004: 111). The nationalistic policies of the state however enforced ethnic boundaries. The nationalistic policies of the state, struggles over depleted natural resources and cultural competition

generated negative stereotypes and hatred, which shattered the inter-ethnic communities in Southern Thailand (Horstmann, 2004: 111).

4.2 Civil Society in Thailand

In comparison to many other countries civil society in Thailand has been characterized as weak. Citizen participation in formal and informal associations and organizations has generally remained at a low level, but civil society still covers various associations – such as politically oriented organizations as well as socially and economically focused associations (Albritton & Bureekul, 2002: 11-12). Although protest movements have rallied tens of thousands of people these social organizations are ad hoc and are not sustained over time (Albritton & Bureekul, 2002: 6). The strongest support of civil society as a whole furthermore originates from older people in the countryside, rather than the young in the cities (Albritton & Bureekul, 2002: 19-20).

Tensions between urban and rural areas in Thailand have created cleavages in civil society in terms of what goals ought to be prioritized. Due to the insecure conditions of the populations in rural areas the main concern of local civil society is security. The urban parts on the other hand have already attained a degree of security, whereby urban civil society in Thailand is primarily concerned with civil liberties (Albritton & Bureekul, 2007: 4). Many civil liberties were suspended after the 2006 military coup – such as freedom of speech and association – which directly obstructed civil society. Even before the latest military coup civil liberties however were constrained. Although public officials have been alleged with torture, murder and disappearances of thousands of people a culture of impunity among public officials has continued in Thailand. The victims of these coercive methods have included state critical members of civil society (McCargo, 2007: 8-11).

Recent studies in Thailand have also indicated that there is a disparity between urban and rural areas regarding attitudes about democracy. If asked to choose between democracy and economic development urban citizens seem to be more inclined than rural citizens to sacrifice democracy for economic development (Albritton & Bureekul, 2007: 11-12). However a paradox can also be identified regarding rural Thailand. Older people in the countryside that generally tend to support civil society also hold more traditional values that adhere to authoritarian state institutions (Albritton & Bureekul, 2007: 27). Conversely urban citizens hold liberal democratic orientations in higher esteem compared to rural citizens. Thereby different value systems in urban and rural settings reveal contrasting value-based preferences of democratic systems (Albritton & Bureekul, 2007: 16).

While civil society in Thailand has been weakened by the coercive state it must be underlined that civil society at its height in 1992 achieved significant changes (Albritton & Bureekul, 2002:5). Although protests that rallied hundreds of thousands of people ended in massacres the military junta could not continue

its policies and had to step down after the popular uprising. The former ruling elites however continued to occupy the powerful political positions in Thailand. When a new constitution was crafted the existence of two different civil societies were revealed in Thailand – one elite-guided, and one empowering ordinary citizens. Thereby civil society in Thailand is not only categorized as weak, but also divided.

4.3 Ethnicity & Conflict in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multicultural society made up by Malays, Chinese, Indians and indigenous groups. Malays are the majority group, the Chinese constitute about 30 % of the population, and the Indians make up about 12 % of the total population (Verma, 2002: 9). The current plural society in Malaysia can be traced to the colonial policies of Great Britain on peninsular Malaysia. In order to stimulate the economy the British rulers brought in immigrants from China and India to supply those work force sectors that local Malay people were unable or reluctant to work in (Verma, 2002: 25). The Chinese brought e.g. competences in business organization, technological skills and entrepreneurship. The Indian immigrant workers were in contrast recruited from the poorest sections of society, as they were willing to work for lower wages (Verma, 2002: 25). Malays were engaged in agricultural activities, while the Chinese expanded their activities and became leading in commerce, trade and banking (Verma, 2002: 26). Intra-ethnic communities emerged, which primarily were divided by labour specialization and economic activity. Ethnic divisions were also the result of other factors such as differences in language, customs, and religion. The immigrant communities did not interact with each other, or with the local Malay people (Verma, 2002: 26). Leading up to the Second World War period Malay nationalists increasingly began challenging these societal divisions. These divisions had created the foundations for future ethnic conflicts. Conflicts between the ethnic groups increased once the nation-building project was initiated after independence from Great Britain in 1957. The question as to how the Malaysian state ought to be organized is still a recurring source of political conflict between the three main ethnic groups.

Ethnicity and conflict became central issues of concern when the Malaysian constitution was to be crafted in 1957. The colonial order of intra-ethnic community divisions had severely marginalized the majority Malay ethnic group. Surveys from the 1970s showed that 75 percent of the household under the poverty line were Malay (Verma, 2002: 62). The Malays thereby demanded constitutional protection by asserting special rights (Verma, 2002: 29). These rights included the protection of language, religion, and quotas and admissions to public services. In return Malaysian citizenship was granted to all ethnic communities. In 1957 a governing coalition was also established – the so called National Front (NF). This coalition has remained in power since its formation.

Today the coalition is comprised of 14 parties, and most are based on ethnicity (Welsh, Suffian, Aeria, 2007: 5). Ethnic conflict has almost without exception been conducted through political channels in Malaysia. Ethnic conflict only deteriorated into severe violence during the May 13th 1969 race riots between Malays and Chinese (Verma, 2002: 29). Despite volatile ethnic tensions Malaysia has not experienced any intra-state conflict or civil war, which positions Malaysia as a unique case in Southeast Asia.

4.4 Civil Society in Malaysia

The formation of the modern Malaysian state and the continuous domination by the NF-government coalition has evolved Malaysia into a hybrid political system comprised of both democratic and authoritarian features and institutions (Welsh, Suffian, Aeria, 2007: 4). The Malaysian state is thus very centralized, and this has restrained and weakened civil society (Verma, 2002: 135). Civil liberties such as freedom of assembly, speech and political organization are limited and regulated (Welsh, Suffian, Aeria, 2007: 4). The government has continuously rationalized these sorts of controls by maintaining that restricted civil liberties are necessary in order to minimize the probability of violent conflict between ethnic groups. Severe coercive methods such as torture have not been applied by the government, although detention methods have periodically been used in order to restrain political opposition. The Malaysian state still foremost relies on self-censorship and unspoken limits in regards to political organization (Welsh, Suffian, Aeria, 2007: 4).

Although the state exercises its restraints over oppositional forces its control over civil society is not total (Ramasamy, 2004: 210). Societal issues that the state neglects or restrains have increasingly been attended to by politicised NGOs. These organizations are critical of the coercive state, and voice their opinion in several matters – such as the state of democracy, violations of human rights, the limited freedom of the press, and the denials of cultural rights (Ramasamy, 2004: 209). The “National consciousness movement”, “Angkatan Belia Islam”, and the “Association of Chinese Schools Boards” are examples of such regime critical NGOs. The role of these NGOs has not gone unnoticed as the regime has tried to negatively label these organizations as “anti-development” or as “foreign sponsored” organizations with “ulterior motives” (Ramasamy, 2004: 209).

Unlike opposition parties the regime critical actors and organizations of civil society do not possess the formal political tools to directly challenge state domination. The ability of civil society to impact the policy agenda of the NF-coalition, or the popular electoral support for the authoritarian democracy system, has unavoidably been limited. Civil society has thus not managed to challenge the hegemonic position of state institutions in Malaysia. Although oppositional political parties and civil society function in different societal spheres these forces have however found a common ground against the regime by advocating and

supporting human rights and the development of democracy. The mere fact that oppositional parties and NGOs can function and try to challenge the hegemony of the state reflects the rapid socioeconomic changes that Malaysia has undergone during the last two decades (Ramasamy, 2004: 210). Foremost three trends have made it possible for civil society to further expand its roles in Malaysia. Rapid economic development created demand for educated people, which gave rise to a new middle class. This middle class began to challenge the regime's control and influence by rallying for democracy and good governance. Opposition parties and some NGOs thereby could come together to promote the cause of democratization and challenge state dominance. The dominant NF-government coalition has also aggregated corruption scandals, lack of good governance, and the use of repressive laws. These and other unpopular activities have paradoxically also strengthened the cause for further democratization in Malaysia (Ramasamy, 2004: 210). Finally, Malaysia has naturally been influenced by global developments, such as the global decline of undemocratic regimes (Ramasamy, 2004: 210). These and other trends have vitalized efforts for further democratization in Malaysia, but despite such trend changes the coercive regime in Malaysia continues to restrain civil society.

5 COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

In this section the dimensions of structure, space, values and impact are analysed comparatively regarding civil society in relation to ethnic conflict in Thailand and Malaysia.

5.1 Structure Dimension

Both disparities and similarities were identified regarding the structural analysis dimension of civil society in Thailand and Malaysia. Although the movement for democracy in Thailand was severely set back by the 2006 military coup civil society has periodically been able to confront authoritarian regimes in Thailand. If the recurring military coups have weakened civil society in Thailand then civil society in Malaysia can in comparison be regarded as weaker. In the latter case civil society has not been able to confront the authoritarian NF-coalition government, which has cemented its position in power over the last five decades. Paradoxically restraints on civil society in Malaysia have not lead to political instabilities or recurring violent ethnic conflicts in comparison to the recurring military coups and ethnic violence in Thailand.

Thailand and Malaysia are both multicultural societies. However, most formal associations in civil society are organized around ethnic backgrounds in both countries (Yaapar, 2005: 484). The Malaysian inter-ethnic NF-coalition is although not a symbol of ethnic egalitarianism. Through the constitution Malays have secured specific rights and public positions that guarantee their politically dominant rank in Malaysia. Still there is a form of silent consent among the electorate, as this elite-based coalition manages to remain in power. This consent however is also forced due to the fact that the regime relies on laws, regulations and even suppression to silence grass root activism (Ramasamy, 2004: 210). In Thailand an elite-based civil society was also identified whereby the political elites remain in power despite periodic shifts in military coups and uprisings by civil society grass roots actors.

The breadth of citizen participation in both cases appears to be similarly limited. Approximately two-fifths of Thailand's citizens are part of a formal association, while approximately one-eight of the citizens are part of an informal association. Few citizens in Thailand have multiple memberships in associations (Albritton & Bureekul, 2002:11-13). In Malaysia less than three-tenths of the citizen population are participating actively in political engagements – such as contacting a political representative during election periods (Welsh, Suffian & Aeria, 2007: 16).

5.2 Space Dimension

Thailand and Malaysia have been categorized as authoritarian democracies, which is of central importance for the analysis dimensions of political space and legal environment. Although Thailand experienced a period of vibrant democratization during 1992–2006 the authoritarian legacy of decades of military junta rule continued to make its presence felt (McCargo, 2007: 1). Civil society in Thailand is regarded with suspicion and contempt by the state. Here civil society is considered as a competitor for power, rather than a partner that can complement state functions (Somchai, 2002: 6-8). Thus many civil liberties have been at odds with the state hegemony. According to McCargo (2007: 9) local politicians, journalists, and activists are regularly murdered in Thailand. Although such coercive methods are rare in Malaysia, civil society is also restrained in Malaysia due to similar perceptions of civil society. Here the state similarly regards civil society as a sphere which can threaten state control (Welsh, Suffian & Aeria 2007: 5).

Although civil society is intra-ethnic in both cases this has had variable outcomes for ethnic peace. The recurring conflict in Southern Thailand has intensified, and has been transformed into an intra-state conflict. In this political and legal environment previous governments as well as the current military regime in Thailand have not promoted inter-ethnic political inclusion (HRW, 2007: 13). In contrast Malaysia has been ruled by an inter-ethnic government coalition since Malaysian independence (Yaapar, 2005: 3). Ethnic rights are recognized and protected in the constitution, and thereby the political and legal environment is highly driven by ethnic lines and ambitions to secure ethnic peace. In Thailand opposite forms of homogenization policies have instead been applied to safeguard the Thai nation state. In contrast to the dominant ethno-political agenda in Malaysia the legal and political space in Thailand has also been focused on the variations in needs between urban and agrarian populations (Albritton & Bureekul, 2002: 6-7).

5.3 Value Dimension

The value analysis dimension of civil society is applied to identify levels of legitimacy and credibility that civil society possesses. In Thailand democratic values are generally held in high esteem, although differences exist between urban and rural populations. However, if asked to choose between democracy and economic growth quite a few people in Thailand would sacrifice democracy (Albritton & Bureekul, 2007: 11-12). A similar pattern was recognized in Malaysia. When asked to choose between economic and political ideals, a large majority chose economic growth over political values (Welsh, Suffian & Aeria, 2007: 18). Democratic values are thus not properly grounded in Thailand or Malaysia, which weakens the potential impact of the civil society.

It can also be argued that civil society in Malaysia is comparatively more likely to adhere to value systems that involve conformity with the authoritative regime. It has been argued that the Malaysian state has maintained its hegemonic position by socializing its values throughout the electorate in regards to its ability to maintain ethnic peace (Ramasamy, 2004: 210). In contrast, civil society in Thailand appears to have demonstrated less conformity with its coercive institutions, as civil society periodically has forcefully confronted coercive regimes (Albritton & Bureekul, 2002: 5).

5.4 Impact Dimension

The impact analysis dimension of civil society is a means of combining the different dimensions in order to properly analyse the influence of civil society. The presented research material in this study furthermore underlined that civil society in both Thailand and Malaysia are weak and divided along ethnic lines. Considering the structure dimension the low levels of citizen participation in civil society in general, and in inter-ethnic associations in particular are noteworthy. Due to the lack of inter-ethnic forms of association civil society is poorly equipped for prevention of ethnic violence. This has been evident in Thailand where ethnic violence is re-emergent and prolonged, while ethnic peace has been maintained in Malaysia through rigorous regulations. Civil society in Thailand, as was mentioned above, has periodically been able to challenge undemocratic regimes, while the opposite has been the case in Malaysia. Despite influx of foreign capital for NGOs in Malaysia, and the continuous integration of Malaysia in the world economy these trend changes have not transformed the impact of civil society. Rapid growth and socioeconomic development with a growing middle class has helped civil society to generate a critical stance against the authoritative regime, but so far this has not lead to change that could challenge the hegemony of the Malaysian state. In both cases civil society is critically restrained by regulations on civil liberties in the legal and political environment. Civil liberties such as freedom of speech, association and political organization are crucial if civil society is to have considerable impact. The value analysis dimension showed that liberal democratic values are highly regarded by most citizens, but if asked to choose between economic growth and democratic values most citizens would prioritize economic growth over democratic ideals in both cases. This finally indicates that democratic values are not well grounded in Thailand and Malaysia, which severely restrains the impact of civil society.

6 LESSONS ON CIVIL SOCIETY & ETHNIC CONFLICT

The purpose of this study was to explore, contrast and explain the role of civil society and ethnic conflict in Thailand and Malaysia. Similarities and differences were analyzed in the comparative case analysis above. In this section the analysis results are concluded and discussed in relation to what more general lessons can be derived about civil society and ethnic conflict.

In the initial theoretical background section it was underlined that civil society is an ambiguous and multifaceted phenomenon that has engaged wide interest across different research fields and anticipations across the political spectrum. With the global trend change from inter-state to intra-state conflicts in the post Cold war era civil society was upheld as a central strategy for maintenance of democratization processes, the rule of law, and the respect for human rights (Belloni, 2001). Leading researchers such as Keane (2003) and Kaldor (2003) also have furthered the debate about civil society from a global perspective. These researchers have argued that civil society involves dimensions beyond the context and relationship with the state. Based on our case analysis it can be concluded that although civil society is not completely bound to state based contexts the influence of global civil society was quite limited in the two authoritarian democracy cases in this study. Thailand and Malaysia constituted two similar cases in terms of coercive political systems, restrained civil society and intra-ethnic community divisions, but these are two opposite cases regarding outcomes for violent ethnic conflict. Civil society in both cases was weak and divided, but in Malaysia recurring ethnic violence has been avoided. Malaysia stands out Southeast Asia as a unique case, whilst Thailand constitutes a typical case in Southeast Asia where intra-state conflicts are re-emergent. The non-violent ethnic peace in Malaysia can be derived to the constitutional protection of ethnic rights in Malaysia, which came about due to specific historical circumstances. Colonialism in Malaysia brought large immigrant groups from China and India, which permanently changed the composition of Malaysian society. Thailand was never colonized, nor did Thailand experience immigration on a similar scale. During European colonialism in SEA Thailand was rather a political buffer zone between the empires of Great Britain and France (Pongsapich, 1998: 307). Ethnic conflicts in Thailand have therefore been constrained to geographic regions where local ethnic groups identify with neighbouring nations – such as the Malay peoples in Southern Thailand, and the Lao peoples in North-eastern Thailand. These prolonged violent ethnic conflicts have previously been categorized as “sons-of-the-soil” conflicts (Möller et al, 2007: 377). Thailand and Malaysia thereby constitute two cases of contrasting intra-ethnic community divisions. Different historic circumstances thus lead to the formation of homogenization policies in Thailand in contrast to the heterogeneous policies in Malaysia.

A central normative topic regarding civil society concerns the nature of the “good” civil society. Among the East Asian democracies the dominant one party structure has been the norm rather than the exception – this applies to consolidated

democracies such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Often this topic is put in relation to the Asian-values debate. In this debate the notion of human rights is challenged as being essentially grounded in Western value systems (Ignatieff, 2003: 62-63). With this type of value critique the idea of civil society as a bottom-up sphere in accordance with Tocquevillian-perspectives could be criticised as a Western value-based construct of civil society. After all, Tocqueville based his notions of associational life in an US American context (Edwards, 2004). Hegel argued that civil society ought to be controlled by the state, as he believed that civil society just as well could become an arena of fierce competition and lead to violent conflict. The authoritative government restraints on civil society in Thailand and Malaysia could be interpreted from a Hegelian perspective. In the Malaysian case the regulating state has managed to prevent ethnic violence and intra-state conflict. Without regulations fundamentalist religious groups can find pockets to further their homogenization agenda and provoke ethnic violence (Verma, 2002: 5). When Thailand however is compared from a Hegelian perspective regulations have instead been used for homogenization policies, which have provoked intra-state conflicts. These homogenization policies have even managed to shatter the once existing inter-ethnic communities in Southern Thailand. Based on our comparative analysis we were therefore more inclined to classify civil society in Thailand and Malaysia as Gramscian. According to Gramsci civil society is a sphere of contestation between civil society institutions and the coercive state institutions (Kaldor, 2003: 21). Through the latter institutions state controls society through its hegemonic ideology and socialized consent. This highly captures the Malaysian context where civil society is restrained by the state, where the electorate continue their silent consent, and where the values of a coercive regime are socialized in civil society and the hegemonic ideology is maintained. Gramsci also underlined that civil society can be a strong site of rebellion against coercive institutions. This Gramscian perspective captures civil society in Thailand as a sphere of periodic shifts between mass rebellion and periods of consent for the coercive regime in power. The ethnic peace in Malaysia is intricate, and although the hegemonic regulation of civil society is a coercive method to maintain regime control the oppositional forces in Malaysia have not been able to present an alternative system to maintain ethnic peace (Ramasamy, 2004: 210). This may also explain why the regime is not challenged by the grass roots in Malaysia?

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