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Civil Society in Authoritarian Regime

The Analysis of China, Burma and Vietnam

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Abstract

Thousands of associations with a variety of social, economical and political goals have been in recent years emerging in China, Burma and Vietnam, in spite of, or rather by authority of, the authoritarian regime. The existence of numerous associations under authoritarian rule is rather a new phenomenon which aroused contradictory views among the observers - hopes on the formation of civil society struggling for liberalization on the one hand, and fears for the associations being only another tool of the regime to manage people's lives on the other. On the grounds of a brief comparative analysis, this thesis aims to explain that one or another of the mentioned views cannot depict the complexity of associational life in these countries, but rather both roles must be viewed as an internal and mutually-interacting part of it. Most of the associations are apparently controlled and used by the authoritarian governments to their own objectives, including the aim to preserve the regime. At the same time, however, the associations use the available space to defend their self-defined interests and achieve their goals. In doing so, they seem to have an indirect political impact – they help to increase public participation and induce gradual liberalization of the countries. Civil societies in China, Burma and Vietnam, and possibly in other authoritarian regimes as well, thus represent a realm where both authoritarian and democratic features meet and co-exist.

Key words: civil society, China, Burma/Myanmar, Vietnam, authoritarian regime, association, non-governmental organization, liberalization, democratization

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1 Introduction

1.1 Disposition

With the third wave of democratization, the concept of civil society has attached a great importance and interest of political scientists. Acknowledging the role of labor and women's movements in challenging the dictatorship in many Latin American countries and intellectual groups deeply involved in the transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, it is no wonder that the concept has been most often researched in the context of countries undertaking transition from authoritarian rule. The following process of consolidating democracy in these countries later engendered a number of studies on civil society operating under democratic regime and focused on its role in strengthening democracy. In contrast, the existence of civil society under authoritarian rule has until recently attracted less attention and the studies were usually focused on the activities of few resisting dissidents and regime's efforts to suppress them.

In comparison to this vision of rather weak civil society largely suppressed by the authoritarian government, the situation of today's China, Burma¹ and Vietnam provides a different and, I would say, new perspective. The ruling authorities, represented by the Communist Party in Vietnam and China and by a military junta in Burma, continue to violate human rights of the people and suppress opposition. In economy, however, they have shifted from centrally-planned socialist model towards market-oriented capitalism which demanded loosening control of some private and public activities. As a result, a number of recent field-work researches revealed thousands of associations with a variety of goals emerging in these countries, in spite of, or rather by authority of, the authoritarian regime.

The existence of numerous associations under authoritarian rule is rather a new phenomenon which aroused contradictory views among the observers - hopes on the formation of civil society struggling for liberalization on the one hand, and fears for the associations being only tightly controlled tool of the regime to manage people's lives on the other. These opposing views serve as a point of departure for this thesis. A comparative study of the associations in China, Burma and Vietnam revealed many aspects that are common for all the three countries

¹ In 1989, the Burmese military junta renamed the country Myanmar, but the old name Burma is still widely used in many publications. Throughout this thesis, I use the name Burma for more clearness, as it resembles more the English name of the people of the country – the Burmese.

and I strived to explain their causes and potential consequences. On the grounds of the analysis, I believe that it is not one or another of the mentioned views that should be used for description of the associations in China, Burma and Vietnam, but that it is rather a range of variations combining the two roles – one cooperative with the regime and one indirectly conducive of liberalization – which shall be recognized as their intrinsic feature, and possibly as an internal characteristic of civil society under authoritarian regime in general.

1.2 Research Questions and Aim of the Thesis

As I indicated above, my research of the associations in China, Burma and Vietnam was particularly focused on two themes – the relationship of the associations to the authoritarian regime and their potential role for transition of the regime. The findings should serve to two-fold aim of this thesis.

First, I strive to explain the functioning of the variety of associations which form the civil society in China, Burma and Vietnam. I compare and analyze its composition, roles and goals, legal framework, sources of funding and international influence put on the associations. The findings of the comparative study are then used to explain the relationship of the associations toward the governments and their role in potential liberalization.

Second, I believe that some of the findings may have consequences for the theory on civil society. There is no consensus today whether the associations under authoritarian rule shall be considered as part of civil society. Some political scientists (Diamond 1999, White 2004) define civil society by being separate and autonomous from the state. These conditions reflect the reality in democratic and, to some extent, in transitional countries; however they exclude the associations within authoritarian regime where no organization is absolutely separate and autonomous from the state. In contrast, other researchers (Beckman 2001, Sjögren 2001, Chandhoke 2004) exclude conditions of autonomy from the definition of civil society claiming that the state-civil society relationship is complex and based on mutual interaction and penetration. Similarly, the effects of civil society on liberalization or democratization in authoritarian regime are still a matter of discussions. Whereas some emphasize the democratic potential of civil society (Diamond 1999, Grugel 2002), others question it with regards to the great diversity of social forces within civil society (Abrahamsen 1996, Kasfir 2004).

With regards to these aims, I defined two research questions which should be answered by this thesis:

1. Why and how should be the emergence of numerous associations in China, Burma and Vietnam considered important in relation to the possible liberalization of these countries and how is this process influenced by the authoritarian regime?
2. What are the potential implications of the findings for civil society theory?

1.3 Methods and Sources

The thesis is structured into several chapters. After introduction, I provide a brief summary of theories on civil society and its relation to the state, political society, and democracy and democratization, particularly with respect to authoritarian regime. On the grounds of this summary, I then conceptualize civil society for the purpose of my research. The third chapter offers empirical background on current political developments in China, Burma and Vietnam and their implications for the expansion of civil society in these countries. The fourth chapter summarizes comparative analysis of the civil society in all three countries, particularly divided into sections on the composition of civil society, its roles and goals, sources of funding and influence by the international actors. The findings here become a basis for my assessment of the relationship between the associations and the government and the role of civil society for possible democratization in the fifth chapter. The sixth chapter summarizes the conclusions of my research and outlines potential implications for theory on civil society.

The analysis of the civil society of China, Burma and Vietnam in this thesis is based on the comparative approach. I identified several variables – composition of civil society, roles and goals, legal framework, sources of funding and international influence. The analysis of these variables revealed significant similarities which I further explain and use to depict the relationship of civil society to the state and its role for potential liberalization.

I selected the countries for the analysis in accordance with the “most similar systems design”. As I explain further, the three examined countries are considered authoritarian regimes (Burma as the military type, whereas Vietnam and China represent party type of non-democratic regime), they have shifted their economy to market-based models and as a result, experience the emergence of numerous associations. This political mixture is, in my opinion, intriguing and research-worthy.

Furthermore, my decision to select these particular countries has been a result of both personal and general motives. From the former point of view, I have been long interested in the region of Far East and I have visited both China and Burma and personally met some of the representatives of newly-emerged grass-roots organizations. Although I cannot claim to do any field-work research in the area, my visits still provided me with better understanding of the situation. As far as general motives are concerned, I could not avoid including China to the research, because it has apparently attracted most interest of the political scientists and as a result, much more empirical information and theories are available on civil society in China than on the other two countries. This allowed me not only to compare all three countries, but also try to apply some of the theoretic comments made on China to the situation in Burma and Vietnam, in order to trace features of civil society under authoritarian rule with more general relevance.

Last but not least, I feel obliged to mention some of the limitations of this thesis. First of all, my research of civil society in China, Burma and Vietnam has been based entirely on secondary literature. The most important sources were

represented by quite recent case studies on civil society in China (Brook & Frolic 1997, Wang 2001, Yang Da-hua 2004), Burma (International Crisis Group 2001, Steinberg 2001, South 2005) and Vietnam (Quan 2000, Sinh 2002, Lux & Straussman 2003). Although these materials are invaluable for the understanding of civil society in these countries and enabled me to depict basic principles of its functioning, I am aware that own field-work research would have given another, deeper, dimension to the thesis.

Other limitations are associated with the concept of civil society itself. As I explain in the theoretical part of the thesis, civil society includes numerous associations representing a great variety of interests, and is thus an extremely broad and diverse concept. Every researcher who deals with civil society is in a great danger of over-generalizing. While doing this research, I was struggling with this danger and striving to emphasize that different associations play different roles. However, I am aware that I could not avoid making some generalizations anyway. Pointing out at this danger, some researchers question the whole concept of civil society and suggest not using it in political science. I do not share the view. Despite the problems of defining civil society, I consider the concept as important tool in analyzing the society and politics of a country, no matter of what kind of regime it has. In my view, thinking through the concept of civil society may, for example, help us understand the quality of democracy, or the causes of long-term hold on power by the dictators. In relation to China, Burma and Vietnam, I believe that the concept can shed light on some consequences of the co-existence of authoritarian rule and capitalism and explain gradual transformation of the societies. Therefore, I decided to use the concept throughout the thesis, similarly as most of the researchers whose studies I used as sources.

Furthermore, civil society is phenomenon of long duration and may have various evolutionary stages over history. Alike, the existence of different forms of civil society in Burma, China and Vietnam in different historical periods have been covered in a number of political studies (see for example Des Forges 1997: 68-95, Jamieson 1993, Steinberg 2001: 98-120). Due to the limited space, this thesis is, however, focused solely on the very recent development of civil society in the examined countries.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Concept of Civil Society and Problem with Definition

Civil society is without doubts one of the most problematic terms to define in political science. It is a complex concept where different contents and features can be emphasized and boundaries are blurred and impossible to strictly set up. The most general and common element of most of the definitions is that civil society is a realm between state and family (Hall 1995, Diamond 1999, White 2004). To distinguish it from society in general, it is necessary to add that it is a public realm which contains “only citizens who act collectively in order to promote or defend their interests towards the state” (Boussard 2002: 159). Furthermore, however, the concept can be based on different features. As Anders Sjögren put it, civil society could be understood, either as “a social sphere; associations within that sphere; their activities in relation to e.g. the state; or a certain (civic) dimension of those activities” (Sjögren 2001: 23). No matter of what is chosen, civil society encompasses associations of different types which represent a great variety of interests within the society, such as human rights groups, women’s organizations, social and welfare associations, intellectual clubs, trade unions etc.

Civil society is inevitably a diverse and pluralistic concept. On the one hand, the variety of interests is intrinsic for all societies and that makes diversity to be an intrinsic feature of civil society anywhere. On the other, various interests may be stronger or weaker and civil societies thus may be very different in their compositions. Moreover, the composition of civil society may change over time. For example, recent years have brought up new trends, such as growing of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in strength and numbers, while pushing back the traditional component of civil society – trade unions (Sjögren 2001: 36). The diversity of interests determines civil society to lack not only clear content, but also geographic boundaries. As many interests are common for people elsewhere, recent years have seen building linkages between organizations from different countries as well as emergence of international organizations. This trend demonstrates “transnational dimension” of civil society (Uhlen 2001: 197).

The diversity represents the main problem with the concept of civil society for political scientists. Civil society embraces thousands of interests, often contrasting and opposing to each other. Civil society is thus a matter of continuous development and encompasses “as much difference as is compatible with the bare minimum of consensus necessary for settled existence” (Hall 1995: 6).

2.2 Civil Society in Authoritarian Regime

Although the concept of civil society is much older, it has attracted much attention of the political scientists with the third wave of democratization. The transition processes in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, saw individual dissidents and mobilized social groups acting in opposition to the governments. Without doubts, these movements contributed to the fall of the communist regimes. Similarly, various human rights groups and labor movements played an important role in the democratization of many Latin American countries.

Most of the previous studies of civil society thus reflected the phenomenon within democratic regime or within countries undertaking transition. O'Donnell and Schmitter, for example, depicted mass public mobilizations that occurred in Latin American and southern European countries after the authoritarian regimes loosened their control and called these events "resurrection of civil society" (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986: 48). Their research revealed that, once the authoritarian regime loosens control and the costs for public associating and collective action are lowering, the countries are likely to experience explosion of demands from various individuals and groups. Similar development has been observed during the transitions in Central and Eastern Europe (Grugel 2002).

In relation to the pre-transition times, O'Donnell and Schmitter pointed out that civil society experiences hard times under non-democratic regime. The authoritarian governments strive to destroy self-organized and autonomous associations and replace them with state-founded organizations with prescribed goals and tightly monitored activities. Besides this regime-controlled arena, the space for public activities may be low and limited to "a few tolerated dissidents and some mavericks carefully ignored by the regime-controlled media" (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986: 48).

Current development in China, Burma and Vietnam signals that the associational life under authoritarian regime could be richer than the previous experience had indicated. Besides the suppressed opposition groups, the countries experience growth of social and economical associations of different kinds. The estimates reveal that there might be thousands of such organizations and the question has thus been raised if we witness a new kind of civil society emerging under authoritarian rule.

When referring to the authoritarian regime, the term "civil society" needs to be further reconsidered. In order to conceptualize it, I depict the relation of civil society to three important realms and issues – state, political society, and democracy and democratization.

2.2.1 Relation to State

Civil society and the state have often been depicted as two autonomous and mutually opposing realms. Larry Diamond, for example, defined civil society as "the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least

partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules” (Diamond 1999: 221). Similarly, Gordon White identified civil society as “an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values” (White 2004: 10). Both White and Diamond admit that the boundaries between the state and civil society are blurred and are thus a matter of a degree rather than a matter of either-or view (Diamond 1999: 224, White 2004: 11). However, both of them take autonomy to be part of the attributes of the civil society, at least in an ideal type of the concept.

The necessity for autonomy has been often linked to the assumed role of civil society as a countervailing power to the state. Civil society is expected to “limit the power of the state” (Diamond 1999: 239), to strive to “prevent tyranny” (Gellner 1995: 42), to perform “as a force for change” of the regime if it is authoritarian (Grugel 2002: 96).

These two perspectives create together an image of state-society dichotomy where the state is associated with coercion and civil society with freedom and where these two realms oppose to each other. This view, however, tends to preclude that civil society can exist only under more or less democratic regime, because it is obvious that under authoritarian rule no organization can be wholly autonomous and separate from the state. On the contrary, many associations there closely cooperate with the state or are even incorporated to the state structures.

In recent studies, this view has faced criticism for various reasons. First, the autonomy and separation of civil society from the state has been questioned. As Beckman points out, in any kind of regime, the relationship between state and civil society is based on “interrelatedness rather than separatedness” and is thus more complex and reciprocal than the state-society dichotomy depicts (Beckman 2001: 55). On the one hand, the state is needed by civil society “for protection and so as to ensure basic social conditions, such as, in recent years, the protection of women inside the household” (Hall 1995: 16). The state also determines the legal framework for functioning of the civil society and often provides parts of its funding. On the other hand, civil society organizations sometimes take over some of the state’s responsibilities, especially in new democracies, where some social services are delivered by the local NGOs, due to the incapability of the state to provide care of the vulnerable members of the society. State and civil society thus “penetrate each other in complex ways” (Abrahamsen 1996: 18). As Brook and Frolic pointed out, civil society “exists by virtue of state-society interaction, not as something between, separate from or autonomous from either” (Brook & Frolic 1997: 12).

Due to the same reasons, it is difficult to view whole civil society as opposing to the state, when at least some of the associations clearly cooperate with the state. Civil societies elsewhere include both those associations that strive to limit state power or even change the regime and those which cooperate with the state in achieving their goals. The interaction between the two realms thus includes conflict, compromising and cooperation at the same time. As Sjögren points out,

“different associations within civil society interact with the state in different ways, and relations range from confrontational to clientelist” (Sjögren 2001: 40).

This led Beckman to a conclusion that the question “who seeks autonomy from or control over whom is an empirical issue that should be kept outside the conceptualization of civil society if we wish to account for the variety of strategies pursued by associations in seeking to promote the interests of their members” (Beckman 2001: 56). In this thesis, I share this view. In my opinion based on the analysis of civil society in China, Burma and Vietnam, not the relation with the state, but rather seeking to promote and defend various interests is the determinant characteristic of civil society.

The state and civil society relations under authoritarian regimes have been in a number of studies depicted solely in a way that civil society is suppressed by the powerful state and the associations are restricted and forcibly incorporated by the state structure. Recent researches, however, revealed that close cooperation between some associations and the state does not necessarily have to be a result of the pressure imposed by the regime, but can be based on the decision by the association itself (Foster 2001, Yang Da-hua 2004). Many organizations have social and economic goals, and “are not necessarily capable of or interested in contesting political power relations either locally or on a nation-wide scale” (Sjögren 2001: 39). In order to achieve their goals or bring benefit to their members, they in fact “seek to be co-opted by an authoritarian state, sacrificing autonomy and accepting constraints” (Foster 2001: 85). The relationship with the state have different degrees here, from those associations which “are almost part of the state” (Frolic 1997: 58) to those that create a “a grey zone of organizations that mediate between the state and the citizenry but are not fully independent of the state as found in liberal democracies” (Lux & Straussman 2003: 178).

The incorporated associations and the dissidents groups and organizations striving for regime change co-exist under authoritarian rule. In his research of China, Frolic thus speaks about two kinds of civil society or what might be called “dual civil societies” (Frolic 1997: 60). Whereas the first group of associations – similar to civil society in Western democracies – is striving to limit state power and enhance the rights and freedoms, the second – so called state-led civil society – was created by the state in order to “help it manage a complex and rapidly expanding economy and changing society” (Frolic 1997: 48).

While researching the non-governmental organizations in China, Ming Wang came to a similar conclusion when he discerned between “from bottom to top NGOs” which are founded by the public and “from top to bottom NGOs” which are organized by the government and directly or indirectly get funds from the government (Wang 2001: 54). To describe the latter, the researchers of NGOs within authoritarian regime often use the term “government-organized NGO” (GONGO) and identify it as “publicly-sponsored NGO, which is an organizational affiliate of a government ministry, its leadership is largely government-appointed, and it receives government funding for its activities” (Foster 2001: 88). The activities and structure of NGOs and GONGOs may be the same; the main criteria for discerning between those two are whether “the initiative to establish the organization is taken by the government” (Wu 2003: 37).

2.2.2 Relation to Political Society

Civil society is also depicted as linked to, but separate from “political society” which is identified as “encompassing all those organized actors (in a democracy, primarily political parties and campaign organizations) whose primary goal is to win control of the state or at least some position for themselves within it” (Diamond 1999: 221). In Diamond’s view, the main difference between political and civil society lies in the fact that civil society “does not seek to govern the polity as a whole”, although it might have a goal to reform the power structure (Diamond 1999: 223). As Haynes pointed out, this does not mean that civil society would not have political goals; on the contrary, it can exercise “profound political influence” (Haynes 1997: 16).

Although in theory the division between political and civil societies seems to be clear, in practice the boundaries can be blurred and Diamond admitted that some organizations in one realm can during time fall into another or pursue “multifaceted agenda that straddle the boundary” (Diamond 1999: 224). The blurriness of the boundaries is particularly present when discussing civil society within authoritarian regime. While some of the associations within civil society oppose to the state and strive for regime change, they quite often are not allowed to do so by establishing an opposition political party. Instead, they form informal groups whose goals might be to call for regime change, but not by aspiring to win power. Moreover, with aiming at the regime change the associations often explicitly distance themselves from the state and feel being an integral part (if not the basis) of civil society. Only after the transition process had started, the parties might grow up from the civil society itself, as it happened in former Czechoslovakia and other European post-Communist countries (Grugel 2002: 96). The efforts to draw an exact line between civil and political society in authoritarian regime are thus hardly to be successful and, in my view, somewhat fruitless. Therefore, in this research I include various opposition movements and dissidents clubs into civil society concept.

2.2.3 Relation to Democracy and Democratization

The historic relevance of some civil society associations for the transition processes led to the commonly spread assumption that civil society has the power to struggle for, support, promote and strengthen democracy and democratization. As Diamond put it, civil society “advances democracy by helping to generate a transition from authoritarian rule to (at least) electoral democracy and by deepening and consolidating democracy once it is established” (Diamond 1999: 233). The democratic potential has been rewarded to civil society as a result of different roles. The experience of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe demonstrated that civil society can contribute to delegitimise the authoritarian rule, promote the interests of the population and put pressure on political rulers; the situation in many Western liberal democracies then revealed

that civil society can increase participation of the public in political decisions, and expose the people to democratic norms and values by being internally democratic (see Diamond 1999: 233-250, Boussard 2002: 160-164, Grugel 2002: 93-5).

All these roles have been proved by the reality in a number of countries with different regimes. Despite that, the assumption of civil society strengthening democracy must be viewed with certain limits, because “not all civil society organizations are democratic, virtuous or trustful” (Boussard 2002: 160). As Nelson Kasfir points out, in a number of developing countries the society is divided according to deep ethnic, religious or other fault lines and civil society there may not only reflect, but even spread these divisions further (Kasfir 2004: 118). Some of the civil society associations thus claim demands and interests that may harm the others, some can pursue non-democratic goals and others are not internally democratic (Kasfir 2004: 129). Even among those associations that pursue democratic goals, not all of them have “the same potential to foster and deepen democracy” (Diamond 1999: 227). As Rita Abrahamsen points out, civil society as a “catch-all concept” thus cannot be depicted as conducive to democratization as a whole (Abrahamsen 1996: 20).

These limits must be applied even to the civil society under authoritarian regime where the relation between civil society and democratization has been commonly viewed with highest conviction. One of the focal question of my research of civil society in China, Burma and Vietnam was thus to investigate its composition and analyze the different roles that various associations may play in relation to the regime change. In doing so, I discerned between the processes of liberalization and democratization. O'Donnell and Schmitter saw liberalization as indicative of the beginning of the transition and representing “the process of making effective certain rights that protect individuals and groups from arbitrary or illegal acts committed by the state” (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986: 7). In contrast, democratization is associated not only with the rights, but also obligations of both the citizens and the state whose obligation is among others being accountable. As Linz and Stepan put it, democratization requires more as it has to include free and fair elections (Reynolds, Stepan, Oo, & Levine 2001: 101).

2.3 Conceptualization for the Purpose of the Thesis

With respect to the previous explanations, I define civil society for the purpose of this research as a flourishing arena of voluntary associations acting “for the pursuit of individual, group or national interests defined independently of state tutelage” (Yang Da-hua 2004: 14). According to this definition, civil society consists of associations of various types and with different relations towards the state; autonomy of people's interests rather than autonomy of associations is emphasized here. In Frolic's terms, both Western liberal civil society and state-led civil society are thus included. Moreover, the definition does not serve to make any assumptions in relation to democratic orientation of civil society.

3 Empirical Background

3.1 Current Political Development in China

In the last decades, China has been going through major changes. The economic program started by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s allowed private entrepreneurship and expressed Party's consent with profit-making efforts. The continuing economic reforms not only shifted the country's economy from centrally-planned to market-based model, but also had major consequences for the whole society by enabling a certain degree of liberalization and opening up.

Since the death of Mao Zedong, Chinese people have no longer been forced to take part in political campaigns. On the contrary, the Chinese Communist Party limited the scope of politics in ordinary life (Buoye 2002: 112), allowed the establishment of different associations and publication of a broad array of literature and music (Ding 2002: 46). What is often highlighted, elections have started to be held in some villages and some, though not the majority, of the Chinese villagers are thus now able to elect their representatives in the village councils and committees (Buoye 2002: 182). Last but not least, the repression of the state has also decreased and, unlike in the Mao Zedong period, the authorities do not take repressive measures against the whole population, but rather implement "selective repression" focused on a small number of those who publicly question the Party's policies (Pei 2000: 75).

High-level politics, however, remains to be protected as the Chinese Communist Party's monopoly. Opposition continues to be suppressed and questioning the Party's legitimacy to rule is not allowed. Freedom House thus constantly labels the country with "not free" status (Freedom House 2005). In political studies, Chinese political system continues to be regarded "authoritarian", often with note that in comparison to brutal rule of Mao Zedong it has moved toward "soft authoritarianism" in 1990s (Ding 2002: 13, Pei 2000: 75).

3.2 Current Political Development in Burma

Burma is regarded as one of the most repressive regimes of today's world. Since the coup in 1962, the country is run by the armed forces, currently represented by a military junta called State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The junta

consists of a dozen of high-ranking officers and estimates indicate that it is in command of around 500 000-soldier army (Reynolds, Stepan, Oo, & Levine 2001: 99). Under military rule, the country has been constantly labeled “not free country” status by Freedom House (Freedom House 2005). Over the years, the opposition has been suppressed, rigid command system has managed the lives of people and systematic watching through networks of informers caused widespread fear dominating the society (Fink 2001). Without doubts, Burma thus remains to be a “politically closed authoritarian regime” (Diamond 2002: 31, Carey 1997: 3).

In spite of the repression, there have been a number of demonstrations and protests against the military rule over the years, with the biggest explosion of public frustration in 1988 when thousands of people took to the streets of the capital Rangoon and other cities. The dissatisfaction of 1988 stemmed from a deep economic crisis that was a result of the junta’s economic program based on nationalization and isolationism. The military suppressed the demonstrations brutally and re-established its strong grip on power, but it realized the urgency of economic reforms. Private businesses were thus allowed and the country has reopened to foreign investment and assistance. In comparison to China and Vietnam, however, the economic reforms have been slower, less systematic and are widely regarded insufficient (Steinberg 2001: 137).

Since 1950s, Burma has been also going through civil conflict between the central government and a number of ethnic minorities’ armed groups asking for greater autonomy. In the 1990s, however, the government was able to sign ceasefire agreement with many of the biggest insurgent groups giving them limited responsibility over their respective areas.

3.3 Current Political Development in Vietnam

In 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) launched a series of economic reforms that were introduced under the name *doi moi* – “renovation”. Since then, Vietnam has been going through the transition from centrally-planned to market economy which enabled the country to achieve a steady economic growth of about 8 per cent per year since 1992 (Quan 2000: 369). Similarly as in China, however, the reforms were made not only with the aim to improve economic situation, but also to preserve current political system and the VCP’s monopoly on power. Political pluralism in the country thus continues to be limited and human rights are severely violated. Freedom House, for example, has since reunification in 1976 consistently labeled Vietnam with “not free” status (Freedom House 2005). Modern day Vietnam thus remains to be an authoritarian one-party regime.

In spite of the intention of the VCP to limit the reforms only to the area of economics, the *doi moi* policies have had severe consequences for the society as a whole and brought up some sort of liberalization in many fields. The economic reforms contributed to increase openness both within the VCP and within the society. Since 1999, for example, the government started to publish a summary of

a national budget which used to be confidential (Quan 2000: 371). The foreign investment helped to increase the information flow from abroad and exposed Vietnamese public to the awareness “of what neighboring countries have and what their own country does not have” (Jönsson 2002: 118). Moreover, the economic reforms demanded decentralization of administrative level which opened new opportunities for “community-based involvement in the policy and decision-making at various local levels” (Sinh 2002: 119).

3.4 Implications for Civil Society

The consequences of introducing market-based economy within the context of authoritarian regime have been a matter of heated discussions in current political studies (see for example Elgström & Hyden 2002). This thesis is not aimed at going into the details of the discussion, however I feel necessary to point out some consequences of the economic changes for civil society in the examined countries.

It seems that the shift to market-based economy in Burma, China and Vietnam provided a stimulus for the growth of civil society. Two trends may be highlighted here. First, the economic reforms permitted profit-making activities which demanded individual participation in economics. In order to increase individual responsibility, the reforms brought at least partial decentralization. Participation and decentralization, although originally aimed solely at the sphere of economics, have been then gradually expanding to the realm of society and with the governments’ tolerance or ignorance, new associations were allowed to emerge. In general, this development is common for all the three examined countries. However, the extent of this process obviously differs from one country to another.

The second factor which induced the emergence of new associations is related to growing developmental problems that the countries have been facing. The shift to market-based economy improved living standards in some areas, but the benefits have been spreading unequally. The leading idea of the reforms that “development takes priority” has also brought new problems; for example in China, the industrialization has been emphasized regardless of the environment and many areas thus suffered from environmental disasters (Wang 2001: 58). Poverty, growing rates of HIV/AIDS, incapability of migrant’s children to attend school, etc. are examples of other problems. The need to address these issues has been noticed by both the population and the governments. The ruling authorities have obviously first strived to solve the problems by expanding the activities of existing organizations and by establishing new GONGOs. However, with severe problems growing, the governments have gradually opened more space also for public-induced activities. In the beginning, these activities were launched by “determined individuals who, in their private or professional lives, have come across problems that the state is doing nothing to address” (Young & MacRae 2002: 37). Later on, the activities have been expanding and various grass-roots associations have been established.

4 Analysis of Civil Society in China, Burma and Vietnam

4.1 Composition

Under authoritarian rule, civil society often comprises of mass state organizations which provide arena for public activities under state control and serve to support the governmental policies (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986: 48). These mass organizations are to be found in all the three examined countries. They are established by the government, funded at least partially from the state budget and operate under the patronage of the main ruling bodies, in case of Burma under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in Vietnam and China under the Communist Party.

To give an example, in 1993 the Burmese junta established the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) under patronage of the SPDC chairman, Senior General Than Shwe. This organization is aimed at supporting the policies of the military and its activities include organizing rallies condemning the opposition. It is believed that there are informal, socially desirable incentives for joining (Steinberg 2001: 114). By 1999, USDA was estimated to have 11 million members (International Crisis Group 2001: 10).

The role of USDA as a mass supporter of governments' policy is in China and Vietnam fulfilled by the Communist Party. Instead of one comprehensive organization, there are thus several massive organizations which serve different groups in these countries. In Vietnam it is, for example, the Vietnam Women's Union and Vietnam Youth Union; in China, these include All-China Youth Federation, All-China Women's Federation, China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese etc. The trade unions are in all the examined countries under strict state control which made them to be organized similarly as these mass organizations (Hansson 2001: 96, Ma 2002: 121, International Crisis Group 2001: 21).

As I explained in the previous section, the growing developmental problems have been forcing the government to respond in recent years by either expanding the activities of existing mass organizations or by establishing new organizations.

For example, in China, the government has established a high number of official charitable organizations over the last 20 years; China Charity Federation, founded in 1994 with the aim to mobilize funds for disaster-relief and a range of poverty-reduction projects, may serve as an example (Young & MacRae 2002:

35). In Burma, most of the social organizations, such as the Myanmar Red Cross and the Maternal and Child Welfare Association, are long believed to be under strict government's control; however, in recent years they have been allowed to expand their activities to focus more on real people's needs (International Crisis Group 2001: 11). Even the USDA started to organize English language and computer skills trainings (Steinberg 2001: 111). In Vietnam, the Vietnam Women's Union has, for example, started to implement a number of internationally-funded projects aimed at supporting small private businesses run by women (United Nations Development Program 2001).

All the mentioned types of organizations were established from the initiative of the regime or incorporated by the regime. They are thus examples of Wang's "from top to bottom" organizations and Frolic's "state-led civil society" (Wang 2001: 54, Frolic 1997: 60).

As I explained in previous section, all the examined countries have been also recently experiencing the emergence of "from bottom to top" associations. In Burma, these include local non-governmental organizations, student and youth groups, women's organizations, writers and journalists' groups and even funeral organizations which help poor people to cover burial expenses (International Crisis Group 2001: 22, South 2005). It seems that the new associations emerged particularly in the areas inhabited by ethnic minorities where the end of armed struggle after the ceasefire revealed deep under-development of the society. For example, in the Kachin State of Burma, the Kachin Independence Organization insisted that foreign NGOs would be able to work in the area as part of the ceasefire deal signed with the government in 1993 (International Crisis Group 2001: 13). In 1998, one of the few professional Burmese NGOs – Metta Development Foundation - was established here to support projects aimed at community development (International Crisis Group 2001: 23).

In Vietnam, various women's savings groups, teaching groups, peasant associations, AIDS combating groups etc. have been emerging. Local water users associations have been also active and even involved in government-run infrastructure projects (Sinh 2002: 120).

In China, groups of parents of disabled children or people advocating rights of migrant workers created the most active, but usually more informal groups. Among the legally registered NGOs, many deal with environmental issues and poverty alleviation (Wang 2001: 59-60). For example, already in 1985, the Amity Foundations was established as one of the "well- (and legally) established, but authentically nongovernmental, Christian groups" which implements social welfare and community development projects (Young & MacRae 2002: 36).

Although there are no credible statistical information on the current numbers of organizations in any of the three countries, the estimates are quite impressive. For example, in 1998, it was estimated that there were more than 1800 national social organizations and 165 600 local organizations in China (Wang 2001: 55). Estimates indicate around 10 000 such organizations in Vietnam (Lux & Straussman 2003: 177). As far as I was able to find out, no estimates are available for Burma, however the researches confirmed the growth in numbers (South 2005, International Crisis Group 2001).

4.2 Legal Framework

The immense growth of associations in China, Burma and Vietnam has been partially enabled by the change in legislature, although there is no single consolidated legal framework for associational functioning, but rather a set of different, often overlapping, relevant laws from other spheres. In all the examined countries, there are also clear signals from the governments to limit, control and monitor the emerging associations by different means.

In China, the legal framework for associations is particularly based on two regulations – “Regulation on Registration and Administration of Social Organizations” adopted in 1989 and amended in 1998, and “Interim Regulation on Registration and Administration of Private Non-profit Organizations” promulgated in 1998 (Wang 2001: 55). Under these regulations, the number and operation of the associations are strictly controlled by the government. The main tool of control is based on “dual management system” which requires two independent departments of the state administration (Ministry of Civil Affairs and State Council) to supervise registration and activities of every organization (Wang 2001: 56). Moreover, it is prohibited to found organizations of similar scope of work in the same administrative level. This principle serves to avoid competition between organizations and to protect existing state-founded organizations (Wang 2001: 56, Yang Da-hua 2004: 5).

Under the current regulations, mass national organizations controlled by the Communist Party are supported to supervise “second-level organizations” which are then not obliged to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Ma 2002: 124). The networks of associations can reach even third or fourth level of hierarchy. For example, a well-known NGO “Project Hope” was established in 1989 by the China Youth Development Foundation, which itself had been founded by the All-China Youth Federation, one of the main Communist Party organizations (Frolic 1997: 60). The relationship between the different levels is “patron-client-based”; the lower-level association pays fees to supervisory organization which ensures legal status and political protection (Ma 2002: 124). It is, however, still little known to what extent the supervisory organization can control the activities of the lower-level associations. Whereas some observers suppose that the supervisory organization do not intervene to the activities of the lower-level ones as long as they do not cause “political trouble” (Ma 2002: 124), others anticipate that these relationship enables to monitor the activities of associations by “a state parent tied to the old structure of power” (Frolic 1997: 61).

The obligation of the associations to link with the state-controlled agencies is set up by the legislature in Vietnam as well. To give an example, Lux and Straussman depicted the Vietnam Union of Science and Technological Associations (VUSTA) which is funded from state budget, has offices in more than 30 different provinces in the country and has been “authorized to provide an organizational umbrella to local socio-professional NGOs” (Lux & Straussman 2004: 178).

The emergence of different associations in Vietnam has been associated with the government's determination to promote scientific research. The 1992 decree "allowed many groups to claim legal status under provisions allowing the formation of organizations to promote scientific and technological innovation and change" (Lux & Straussman 2004: 177). The most significant shift has, however, come with the Decree No. 29/CP of May 1998, which has since been known as the "People Know, People Discuss, People Execute and People Supervise" decree (Quan 2000: 372). Under the decree, the government allowed for the establishment of private social funds (Lux & Straussman 2004: 177), requested local governments to provide "information on policies, laws, long-term and annual socio-economic development plans of the communes, land-use plans and annual draft budget" (Sinh 2002: 122) and allowed "direct elections at the commune level" (Quan 2000: 372). Not the least importantly, the decree guaranteed "citizen's rights to be involved in establishing local committees to monitor construction projects" (Sinh 2002: 122). This enabled greater involvement of the public in community development projects and gave rise to many local associations with community goals, such as implementing water sources and sanitation reconstructions or forest management projects.

To depict the legal environment of the associations in Burma is an extremely difficult task. The SPDC governs by decree, but it seems that there have been no decrees set up specifically on the functioning of associations. Many of the associations thus have been emerging and working without active state consent, they rather gradually filled the gap created by state's lack of interest in this area. They are, of course, limited by the military rules of the game, however the legal framework for their functioning is lacking and this creates a chance to be independent from the state as far as the activities do not provoke crackdown.

The uncertainty, what is legal and what not, has been, although to a lesser extent, present even in China and Vietnam. The conditions for registration are complicated and many associations are not able to fulfill them. However, their existence is tolerated by the authorities. They thus operate as informal organizations, outside of the legal framework. As Young and MacRae pointed out in case of China (with the validity for Vietnam and Burma too), it seems that "the state prefers to tolerate unofficial initiatives that it can crack down upon if the political winds change, rather than allow them to exist formally in the first place" (Young & MacRae 2002: 37).

Any "political" activities are, of course, strictly prohibited in all the three examined countries. The situation can be well illustrated by the 1988 declaration of Nguyen Van Linh, then general secretary of VCP, who said that "new organizations, including NGOs, will not be allowed to make demands that conflict with overall national interests" (Clarke 1998: 36). Associations criticizing human rights abuse, calling for regime change, or just striving for a change of particular law thus in all the three countries usually operate underground and their members are exposed to systematic harassment. To give an example, the members of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which was banned in 1981 for criticizing human rights violations, faces ongoing persecution and its leaders are frequently detained in their temples, in the so called "pagoda arrests".

4.3 Roles and Goals

In all the examined countries, the development-focused policy not only contributed to the emergence of new associations, but also to a great extent determined the role and goals of both newly-established and existing organizations.

In the case of China, Ming Wang states that the NGOs are active particularly in the area of “environmental protection, supporting the poor, family planning, education support, protection of disable person, welfare of aged people, protection of women benefits, development of community” (Wang 2001: 58). Similarly, the associations in Burma and Vietnam focus particularly on the area of education, social welfare, and various community development projects (South 2005, International Crisis Group 2001: 23).

It thus seems that the majority of associations in China, Burma and Vietnam are focused on aspects involving development. In order to generalize their activities, one can say that they have an overarching goal of alleviating poverty and supporting development.

In my view, such specified goals also provide explanation why the authoritarian governments of China, Burma and Vietnam tolerate the existence of the associations and which role they expect the associations to play. As the experts emphasize in the case of China, the government realized “its own inability to deal with social welfare problems that have accompanied the dramatic macro-economic reforms” and expects both government-set-up organizations and grass-roots associations to contribute to solving these problems (Wu 2003: 36, Wang 2001: 58). The urgency of developmental problems, such as poverty, HIV/AIDS rates, inability of children to go to school, lack of sanitation and drinkable water systems etc., both helped to increase public participation and found the grass-roots associations, and make the government to tolerate them.

Providing that both the government and the people expect the associations to strive for solving above mentioned problems, it might be pointed out that the majority of the associations fulfill the service delivery role. Supplementary and complementary to the government, their activities are aimed at “filling the gaps in the provision of social services” (Yang Da-hua 2004: 5), such as education, health care, environmental protection, worker’s rights protection etc. The situation of parents of disabled children in China who “after a long and fruitless search for cures or treatments, set up some facility of their own: an autistic school, a daycare center for children with cerebral palsy, or an educational toy exchange”, may serve as a good example (Young & MacRae 2002: 37). Another example was given by the field-work research in Mon state of Burma by Ashley South which revealed that Mon organizations “managed to run 187 Mon National Schools and 186 ‘mixed’ schools (shared with the state system), attended by more than 50,000 pupils” (South 2005). This development resembles, as South pointed out, creating almost a “para-state or local authority system, rather than a civil society initiative” (South 2005).

In comparison to the great importance attached to the service delivery role, the advocacy and lobbying role of the associations seems to be rather low in all the three examined countries. In democratic countries, many non-governmental organizations focus on monitoring the rule of law, defending human rights and lobbying for changing those regulations that may cause injustice. Under authoritarian rule, this role of civil society is obviously restricted. In current Burma, the researchers anticipate that there are only few associations striving to fulfill these roles, almost all illegal and usually based in the areas controlled by the armed ethnic insurgent groups or in the border areas of neighboring countries, such as Chin Human Rights Organization, the Karen Information Centre, and the Shan Human Rights Foundation (International Crisis Group 2001: 6). In Vietnam, many religious organizations overtook the role and criticize human rights violations and call for more freedoms. As a result of these activities, the organizations are, however, subject of persecution. As Young and MacRae pointed out in the case of China (with the validity for the other countries too), the role is often fulfilled by “a small but brave array of people who have espoused specific causes – natural environment, the rights of women, the rights of migrant workers” and found “different means of advocating and providing services, in a more or less legal way” (Young & MacRae 2002: 36). The government’s attitude towards this role is in all the countries negative; however the extent of restrictions against the activities varies from country to country and depends on the context.

Various researches indicate that the representatives of the associations are aware of their limitations and wittingly avoid activities that might be regarded as unwanted by the government. In order to avoid conflict with the state authorities, many associations thus focus on implementing community helping projects and resign to attempt influencing governmental policies. Others still strive for fulfilling the role, but balance on the edge of legal activities and thus developed “a complex mixture of strategic positioning and careful choice of political vocabulary” (Dorman 2001: 153). This situation seems to be similar in all the authoritarian countries, as a question asked by a representative of a Zimbabwean NGO illustrated: “Do we want to be martyrs or do we want to be social reformers?” (Dorman 2001: 142)

4.4 Funding

The functioning of NGOs around the world revealed that funding for their projects come from different sources which include public donations, the government and state institutions, private companies, bilateral aid, the United Nations and its agencies, other multilateral agencies, international NGOs and international foundations (Lux & Straussman 2004: 177). Twenty years ago it would be impossible to find some of these sources in China, Burma and Vietnam, however today all of these sources are present there.

With the slow emergence of the middle classes in the urban areas as a result of economic changes, it seems that the money donation is slowly growing in the respective countries. For example, a national survey among more than 30 000 people in 20 Chinese provinces in 1996 revealed that 73% of them donated money to the Project Hope which is focused on building schools in poor rural areas and providing scholarship to students from poor families (Ma 2002: 126). The same project has been supported by a number of foreign private corporations; for example Motorola Inc. and The Coca-Cola Co. donated about 2 millions USD to the Project (Young & MacRae 2002: 37).

As far as the money from the state institutions are concerned, various ways of government funding are to be found in all the countries. Mass government-founded organizations are usually funded directly from the state budget. The lower level GONGOs and grass-roots associations, however, may have difficulties in obtaining state money. As Wu pointed out, although many Chinese GONGOs receive some governmental funding today, the state is gradually pushing them to be self-sufficient and “it is well known among national GONGO leaders that in three to five years, the budget coming from the government will be cut down to zero” (Wu 2003: 36). The same situation can be seen in Vietnam and Burma where the state pushes the associations to raise money from public donations and particularly from international donors. Their involvement is depicted in following section.

4.5 Influence by the International Actors

The international involvement in China, Burma and Vietnam has increased significantly following the economic reforms. Besides trade and business investment, the involvement is in all the countries based particularly on relief and development aid which is focused on projects aimed at alleviating poverty, building infrastructure, improving educational facilities and health care etc.

According to Lux and Straussman, “the development aid to Vietnam has increased a 1000% over past ten years” (Lux & Straussman 2003: 178). Both China and Vietnam has almost consistently been among the top ten recipients of official development assistance since 1996 (United Nations Development Project 2004: 2). The situation of Burma is slightly different. The international community condemned the brutal crackdown on demonstrating students in 1988 and thus reduced some of the assistance programs. Moreover, the United States and the European Union have imposed partial economic sanctions. In comparison to Vietnam and China, the development assistance to Burma has thus been lower. In recent years, however, the humanitarian agencies have warned against a humanitarian crisis that the Burmese people have been facing (International Crisis Group 2004: 14). Therefore, there are about ten international NGOs and several UN agencies working in Burma today and the international involvement has been gradually increasing (International Crisis Group 2001: 21).

The international organizations implement a number of development assistance projects (such as providing food, health care and shelter to the poorest population, reconstructing schools and hospitals etc.) and provide funding for projects implemented by local organizations. The funding is appreciated and sought by the authoritarian governments; however, the conditions of international involvement are limited by the regime. Alike the local associations, the international donors are not allowed to pursue any political activities or support local associations having these goals. The advocacy role of international NGOs has been restricted; they are allowed to contribute to solving the problems, but are not able to influence national policies in order to ensure changing the rules that inhibit sustainable development (International Crisis Group 2001: 22).

In all the three examined countries, the international organizations have to register with the governmental bodies and are often pressed to channel the money through state structures or government-run organizations. In China, as Frolic points out, the government established a number of GONGOs to gain the international funding and “to organize and direct the funding in areas of urgent economic need” (Frolic 1997: 61); although it does not have to be the case, some of these organizations might not respond to real people’s needs, but might have been created as artificial recipients of money. In Vietnam, all the international organizations - UN agencies, private foundations and international NGOs - had to be officially recognized to operate in the country by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Planning and Investment or a specific department of Ministry of Foreign Affairs for foreign agencies called the Union for Friendship Organizations (Lux & Straussman 2004: 176). The Vietnamese government anticipated that “all technical assistance, in-kind transfers and financial resources would flow through government channels to support government agencies and initiatives upon which both the donor and the recipient could agree” (Lux & Straussman 2004: 176).

With having their own agenda of funding priorities, it is necessary to mention that the international donors may also contribute to establishing artificial NGOs in China, Burma and Vietnam. Overall researches reveal that NGOs are becoming increasingly dependent on their donors which results in NGOs emerging or adjusting their agenda “in response not to an inner commitment to a social mission, but rather to a perceived economic priority” (Korten & Quizon 1995: 152). Due to the lack of research, it is difficult to give a specific example; however this trend has been noticed around the world and there is thus no reason to expect that the examined countries would have avoided it.

The international organizations seem to have also some positive effects on the Chinese, Burmese and Vietnamese associations. First of all, many of the international donors demand non-governmental actors to be included in the projects funded by them (Lux & Straussman 2003: 178). In order to receive the money, the governments are thus forced to tolerate operating of non-governmental organizations. This might be the case of Metta Development Foundation, organization which is often depicted as “one of the few independent NGOs permitted” in Burma (International Crisis Group 2001: 23). Being considered a reliable partner in implementing development projects, the Foundation has

received funding from well-known international NGOs and agencies, such as ACTIONAID, Swiss Foundation for Development Cooperation (SWISSAID), Netherlands Organization for International Development Cooperation (NOVIB), German Agro Action etc. (Metta Development Foundation 2005). Thanks to the funding, by 2003 the Metta Development Foundation had a budget of over 500 000 USD and 13 full-time staff (South 2005).

The demand of including non-governmental actors seems also to support greater interaction between the mass organizations, GONGOs and associations founded from below. In Vietnam, for example, the Vietnam Women's Union has been implementing projects to support rural household in cooperation with local associations and with the financing of international donors.

The interaction with international organizations also expose the local associations to different forms of work, administration and funding rules which are intrinsic for international civil society, but which, for example in Vietnam, "have not been seen since 1956" (Lux & Straussman 2004: 177).

It seems that the international involvement may contribute to changing relations between the state and the associations. As Wu pointed out, some of Chinese GONGOs, initially established just to receive international funding and solve developmental problems, developed over times "their own organizational ideologies and capacities" and today "the scope of their activities, and the recognition they have obtained from both insiders and outsiders have gone far beyond what the state ever intended" (Wu 2003: 40). In general, the researchers agree that the pressure of international donors to include non-governmental actors in implementing the projects strengthen the autonomy of local associations in China, Burma and Vietnam (Wu 2003: 42, Lux & Straussman 2004: 177).

5 Interpretation of the Analysis

5.1 Relation of Civil Society to Authoritarian Regime

The analysis revealed that all the three examined countries have been experiencing the state activity in organizing people into mass state-run organizations on the one hand, and autonomous formation of groups without state stimulus, so called “auto-organization” (Brook 1997: 22), on the other. This situation indicates that all the three countries experience what Frolic called “dual civil societies” (Frolic 1997: 60) where one part of the civil society is state-led (induced by the ruling authorities) and the other is formed by the people.

However, the term “dual” might be often understood as “opposing” or “contrasting” which would be, in my view, misleading. The analysis showed that there is a close relationship between these two civil societies. First, many of the projects are implemented together by the organizations representing both realms as a result of the international donors’ pressure to include non-governmental actors on the one hand, and the governments’ pressure to channel the funding through regime-controlled organizations on the other. Second, the legislature in China and Vietnam (less in Burma as the analysis showed) forces the grass-roots organization to register with or tie themselves to GONGOs and government-run institutions. This indicates that it is rather complexity than duality which depicts the civil society within authoritarian regime of China, Burma and Vietnam.

Another factor I would highlight rests on the power relations in the state-civil society relationship in China, Burma and Vietnam. The comparison of legal framework, roles and goals and funding revealed that in all the three examined countries, the associations are closely linked to the state and the linkage is under state tutelage. However, a closer examination indicates that the state is not the only entity having advantages from the relationship. Instead, I would argue that the associations use any space available to having their interests to be reached and their position to be getting stronger. The relationship thus seems to be based on mutual interaction, rather than on one-sided exploitation.

From one point of view, the state utilizes civil society for its own objectives. As the comparison of the roles and goals and funding revealed, the associations may be contributing to solve social and developmental problems and may more easily get international funding. Therefore, it is favorable for the state to tolerate their activities. At the same time, the state is able to limit and control the organizations to a great extent by legal framework, registration and linkage with government-run organizations. In order to provide more easily controlled arena

with similar goals, the governments also responded by either expanding the services provided by the mass organizations (e.g. the case of Burmese USDA, or Vietnam Women's Union) or by establishing a variety of GONGOs to serve as support mechanisms. As a result, truly autonomous associations are rare and those, that exist, often operate without clear legal status and their scope of activity is rather limited (Yang Da-hua 2004: 4).

However, from the other point of view, the organizations use any space available to achieving their goals and strengthening their position. This process seems to be less dependent on the state that one might expect. First of all, the organizations founded from below pursue various interests and fulfill needs defined by the members of the society. Although the government may through legal obstacles restrict some interests and needs to be fulfilled, in the first stage it does not participate in defining them. Many Burmese, Vietnamese and Chinese grass-roots organizations thus objectively reflect real needs and interests of the societies which are defined autonomously on the state.

Furthermore, it seems that the state's control over the associations is not so comprehensive as the investigation of legal framework might suggest. The information on funding show that the governments have been gradually giving up to be the main donors for the associations and even the GONGOs and mass organizations are more and more forced to seek the money from public donations, private companies and international donors. Although this will not decrease their legal linkage to the government, it may be assumed that those organizations that "do not depend entirely on the government for their income, have more freedom in decision making, management and program operation" (Ma 2002: 121). The Burmese Metta Development Foundation may be mentioned as an example of organization supporting this argument. Metta is focused mainly on small-scale community based projects, such as building village drinking water systems, supporting innovative farming activities, organizing teachers training etc. As Metta's director Daw Seng Raw put it, the organization members "believe that the concept of community based projects lends itself readily to the creation of civil society" in Burma (Metta Development Foundation 2005). Metta has more than 15 international donors, which indicates that its programs are able to meet international standards. The researchers point out that Metta seems to be able to operate quite independently, as long as it "stays away from politics and carefully manages its relations with authorities at various levels" (International Crisis Group 2001: 23, South 2005). In his research of Chinese NGOs, Yang Da-hua pointed out to the same development – as long as the associations do not directly contradict the objectives of the state, they are able to decide scope and extent of their activities in order to fulfill their members' interests (Yang Da-hua 2004: 5). The same attitude might be seen in Vietnam.

The state authorities in China, Burma and Vietnam thus seem to tolerate functional autonomy of the associations, but strive to control the emergence and the "very legitimacy of these organizations" (Yang Da-hua 2004: 6). As I explained in the section on roles and goals, the associations' representatives are aware of their limitations and avoid attempts to interfere in the state policies and political activities that would be regarded confrontational by the regime. Instead,

they use the overall relaxation and their linkage to the state to achieve their goals. As Yang Da-hua put it, the relationship between the state and the associations thus resembles a marriage of convenience which brings advantages to both sides and is based on both “state penetration of society, as well as societal penetration of the state” (Yang Da-hua 2004: 19).

In some points, this reciprocal fundamental of relationship resembles the relations between society and state in democratic countries, where, as I depicted in the theoretical background section, the state and society “penetrate each other in complex ways” (Abrahamsen 1996: 18). Under authoritarian regime, the limitations of the civil society by the state are just greater and more strictly set up.

5.2 Role of Civil Society for Transition of the Regime

The analysis of civil society in China, Burma and Vietnam revealed that it includes organizations with different relationship towards the government and different goals. Whereas some organizations oppose to the state power, others rather cooperate with the state structures in order to fulfill service delivery role. On the grounds of these differences, I think that various associations might also play different roles in relation to potential democratization.

First, the mass organizations were established by the governments to support the regime. Although the analysis indicated that in recent years these organizations have been expanding their activities with respect to people’s needs and started to cooperate with local associations founded from below, their major attitude of supporting the government and their linkage to the state apparatus has not dramatically changed in any of the examined countries. In my view, these organizations thus directly support the regime and not its change (although this attitude, of course, does not necessarily reflect the opinions of all members of these organizations).

Second, in contrast to this attitude, we can discern various underground student and human rights movements, religious organizations calling for human rights protection and individual dissidents opposing to the governmental policies. They directly support not only liberalization of the current regime, but a regime change and democratization. This part of civil society is also present in all the three countries.

The third part of civil society, which I see in Burma, China and Vietnam, is represented by a wide range of associations, both founded from below and government-organized, which have mostly social and economic goals. These associations have not pursued explicit “anti-regime” attitudes; neither have they directly supported authoritarian regime. Instead, they strive to improve the living standards, defend the interests of the people and draw attention to various problems and gaps in social services. Therefore, they seem not to have any direct, clearly visible, impact on potential regime change.

However, some aspects of the analysis indicate that they still might have some political impact. In my view, this impact seems to be more indirect and rather conducive to liberalization of the countries, then opposing to it. Some of the GONGOs and even mass organizations may share this indirect impact.

In his research of Chinese associations, Wu indicated that even where the state itself created the organizations, “there can be unintended consequences related to those actions that result in a strengthening of the power of society” (Wu 2003: 35). The increasing ability of the associations to fulfill self-defined interests depicted in the analysis may, in my view, serve as an example of such consequences. Many organizations were founded from below to represent the interests of the people. Their projects respond to community needs and are implemented with the help of the community itself. Therefore, the process cannot only improve the living conditions, but also strengthen the community by increasing participation of its members. These associations thus seem to be valuable as they “provide the rare opportunity for their participants to acquire the skills and habits of self-governance” (Yang Da-hua 2004: 10). In the context of authoritarian rule, the local realm is, as Brook and Frolic put it, “where the state first loosens (or loses) control” (Brook & Frolic 1997: 14) and the increase of public activity in community-based projects may signal precisely this development. As Yang Da-hua pointed out, participation in small-scale projects and even in state-controlled associations may be potentially beneficial for transition; for example in the former USSR, “activists in state-sponsored housing boards, parents’ associations and the like were well represented in the voluntary associations that sprang up in the 1980s” (Yang Da-hua 2004: 11).

The other factor that indicates the potential of the associations to contribute to the liberalization of the examined countries lies on the ability of the associations to achieve their social and economic goals. The majority of the associations strive to improve conditions of vulnerable members of the society and cover those problems that were not being solved by the state. Without conflictual attitudes and by solely doing so, the associations may influence the state to accept the problem and start working on its solution. This process may result in the governments gradually implementing reforms. I admit that this statement lies still in the field of speculation. However, there are some developments that support the view. For example, a number of informal schools have been established for internal migrants’ children in China who were not able to attend ordinary state schools in their new home area. Whereas in the past these schools were subjected to harassment from education authorities, today the “bureaucratic hostility seems to be lower” and the authorities started to legalize some of the schools (Young & MacRae 2002: 37).

These findings indicate that the associations without explicit political attitudes may still have political impact and may be conducive to liberalization in O’Donnell and Schmitter’s definition of this term (O’Donnell & Schmitter 1986: 7). The liberalization does not necessarily lead to democratization and to the regime change. However, under strict authoritarian rule of China, Burma and Vietnam, such gradual process would still mean a significant positive change.

6 Conclusions

For two decades, authoritarian rule has been merging with market-based economy in China, Burma and Vietnam. Recently, these two were joined by a third aspect - the thousands of public associations with a range of social, economical and political goals. Although some associations were operating in many former authoritarian countries before, such numerous and rich civil society represents, in my view, quite a new, research-worthy phenomenon.

Civil society in China, Burma and Vietnam is, as my research confirmed, a complex of associations with different relationship to the authoritarian governments. Three main categories can be seen here - mass organizations founded by the government, in order to support the ruling authorities' policy; GONGOs established with governmental support to serve for different social and economic purposes; and grass-roots organizations founded by the public to represent, defend or promote various interests.

The authoritarian governments in the respective countries strive to influence all of these three types of organizations. They use the associations to their objectives and strive to control their emergence, legal position and their goals. To the greatest possible extent, the regimes thus attempt to rule over civil society and to prevent it from endangering the position of ruling authorities. However, as I believe my analysis revealed, the associations are not only a weak and exploitable entity. On the contrary, they are using the available space to achieve their goals which, at least in case of the grass-roots organizations, were defined by the people without much of the state interference.

On the grounds of my analysis, I also tried to outline the potential role which the associations in China, Burma and Vietnam may play in relation to possible liberalization. In my view, different roles may be prescribed to different types of organizations. Mass organizations were established by the governments as instruments to support governmental policies and their role for liberalization is thus rather low. In contrast, other, often illegal and underground, organizations openly challenge the regime and call for democratization of the country.

The majority of the associations, however, seem not to belong to any of these two groups. These associations pursue mainly social and economical goals and avoid expressing direct attitudes toward the regime. With respect to some findings of the analysis, I however believe that even those may have indirect political impact which seems to be rather conducive to regime transition. Their contribution rests on the efforts to respond to people's needs and to defend people's interests. By responding to various social and developmental problems, they draw attention to gaps within the state responsibility which may influence the governments to take actions in order to solve the problems. Without conflictual attitude towards the regime, they contribute to more opening and relaxation of the

regime which have been started with the economic reforms. In my opinion, they thus do not strive for immediate regime change and democratization (as the dissent and opposition movements do), but rather support gradual liberalization of the countries.

With respect to these findings, I view civil society in China, Burma and Vietnam as a realm where both authoritarian and democratic features meet and co-exist. This intriguing mixture is a matter of continuous development and no one can today say which feature will once prevail. With regard to many associations successfully achieving their goals, inducing state's response to social and developmental problems and strengthening their organization, program implementation and financial bases, I would be, however, quite optimistic.

The combination of both democratic and authoritarian features as a characteristic of civil society might have, in my view, more general relevance for other authoritarian countries; however I am aware that it might be dependent on market-based economy which has not been adopted by all of them. Further research to investigate the correlation is thus necessary.

Can any of the findings then have implications for the civil society theory? In my view, one important aspect might have. The cases of China, Burma and Vietnam demonstrate that rich associational life under authoritarian regime is possible. In the variety of their activities, goals and funding sources, the associations are becoming more and more similar to those operating in the democratic countries. They are, of course, limited by the regime-set-up rules; however this lack of autonomy does not prevent them from playing an important role of representing people's interests. The ability of the people to define their interests and to strive for achieving them is, in my view, a fundamental principle of civil society. Therefore, I see the current associations in the respective countries as another argument for defining civil society through the autonomy of interests, rather than autonomy of the associations. If such definition is chosen, the concept of civil society will encompass the sub-category of civil society in authoritarian regime and its whole complexity of relations to the state. This is not necessarily a change of big significance, but it can be viewed as a first step. Further research of civil society under authoritarian regime, I believe, will bring up new contributions to the civil society theory.

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