6

CIVIL SOCIETY AND EFFORTS AT REGIME CHANGE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Regime change does not only include the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, but also autocratisation processes such as democratic breakdown or backsliding (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). But who are the main actors behind these transformations? Linz and Stepan acknowledge that civil society organisations (CSOs) 'can help transitions get started, help resist reversals, help push transitions to their completion, help consolidate, and help deepen democracy' (Linz and Stepan 1996, 9), but they still focus on the rational strategies of regime and opposition elites during democratisation. They treat civil society, contentious politics, social movements, etc. rather as secondary factors. According to such transitologists, regime change as democratic transition usually begins with splits among authoritarian elites (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). In contrast to this approach, this chapter highlights the important role CSOs play before and during regime change.

Civil society comprises, per Muthiah Alagappa,

> formal and informal voluntary and ascriptive organizations including churches, labor unions, farmers' organizations, academic and student groups, debating societies and reading groups, nonstate media, NGOs, occupational associations, business federations, and sports and leisure groups. ... Transnational and global organizations and movements, as well as diaspora and exiled communities, that significantly influence the composition and dynamics of civil society in a country should also be taken into account.
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> *(Alagappa 2004, 36)*

An idealised concept expects CSOs to forge links between society and elites, formulate alternative ideas on the polity at large and on specific policies, bridge cleavages separating ethnic and religious groups, and recruit and socialise activists in a Tocquevillian manner (Edwards 2011, 4). However, the reality is more complex. The relationship between civil society and the state is often blurred (Bob 2011; Weiss 2021). Civil society activists may even more or less willingly back authoritarianism or engender autocratisation (Beittinger-Lee 2010; Wischermann et al. 2018; Sombatpoonsiri 2021). This chapter, thus, highlights the ambiguous role of civil society during democratisation (see also Bernhard 2020, 341). This dark side of civil society includes groups that may seem initially to be innocuous but become increasingly anti-democratic, and groups that were established from the start only

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to obstruct democratisation or to undermine already existing democracies (Berman 1997). A differentiated understanding of regime change in Southeast Asia necessitates an analysis of the various, often contrasting impacts of CSOs.

In order to improve our understanding of the connection between civil society and regime change, this chapter focuses on two Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia and Malaysia. In both cases, socio-economic developments have resulted in shifting social structures and global pressures for economic and political reforms. Both have combined a strategy of export-oriented industrialisation with strong control of labour organisations, and both have experienced a remarkable mushrooming of CSOs since the 1970s, growing salience of Islamist and ethnicist groups and, during the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, the emergence of broad social movements for reform. The differing trajectories of CSOs in each shed light on specific historical and political factors. Since the strength of civil society actors depends on political opportunity structures and the overall constellation of political forces (Della Porta 2014, 12f; Dibley and Ford 2019; Bernhard 2020), it makes sense to analyse the impact of civil society on democratisation diachronically. Therefore, the chapter analyses the trajectories of CSOs in Indonesia, then in Malaysia, and concludes with remarks on the implications of this comparison.

Regime change and civil society in Indonesia

A strong anti-colonial nationalist mobilisation produced a diverse and active civil society whose pillarisation and polarisation contributed to the demise of democracy in the late 1950s and the anti-communist massacres of the mid-1960s. The subsequent repression during the New Order period resulted in a taming of CSOs, but as of the 1970s, different institutions and movements slowly began to emerge in the wake of socio-economic developments and rising demands for political participation. Driving the dissolution of the New Order in 1998 were various actors within a heterogeneous *Reformasi* or reform movement, culminating in an anarchic and partly violent transition. Afterwards, activists revived diverse CSOs, including highly politicised groups of the 1950s. In recent years, CSOs have often initiated and amplified polarisation, especially between Islamists and multi-religious or secular groups.

Nationalist mobilisation and domestication under authoritarian rule

Under Dutch colonialism, a politicised civil society emerged with the anti-colonial movement. The Sarekat Islam (Islamic Association), established in 1911, was the first mass organisation, with a few hundred thousand members demanding self-governance. Other institutions, like Muhammadiyah as a proponent of modernist Islam and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as the traditionalist reaction to it, quickly attracted mass followerships. At around the same time, the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) became one of the biggest and best organised Communist parties worldwide, with links to powerful trade unions. A multi-religious, rather secular radical nationalism, epitomised by President Sukarno, slowly achieved a dominant position among anti-colonial groups. Lastly, national independence was won in 1949 after an internecine war against the Dutch, ushering in a parliamentary democracy. During that *revolusi* period (1945–49), polarisation and politicisation within Indonesian society had grown and in many regions, traditional and/or aristocratic elites weakened markedly.

In the 1950s, the biggest political parties represented different socio-cultural milieus or streams (*aliran*): communism, traditionalist Islam, modernist Islam, and a multi-religious nationalism (Ufen 2008). Parties with close links to trade unions or professional, religious, women's, and other organisations were rooted in specific segments of civil society. These ties contributed to the collapse of parliamentary democracy in the late 1950s because a major proportion of CSOs were at least ambivalent in their stance towards democracy. During the subsequent Guided Democracy period (1957–65) under President Sukarno, political polarisation was still very intensive (Aspinall 2004, 63ff). The killings of at least 500,000 members and (often alleged) supporters of the PKI in 1965–66 were only possible because the military closely cooperated with sections of civil society, especially those groups linked to NU. This collaboration prepared the ground for unprecedented violence.

Under the New Order (1966–98), civil society was generally and for a long time severely suppressed because the regime tried to depoliticise, demobilise, and control CSOs. Generally, opposition was unacceptable to President Suharto. The ideology of the 'family state' (*negara kekeluargaan*) conceived of society as an organic entity with Suharto as father; the concept of civil society was alien to powerholders. In this vein, the government controlled the two legal semi-opposition parties, PDI and PPP, and thus severed the once-close links between political parties and civil society.

The strict anti-communist policies of the New Order regime (Goodfellow 1995) significantly curtailed the activities of the labour movement. However, student movements of 1973–74 and 1977–78 formulated a more fundamental criticism of the New Order. Elite groups such as the signatories of Petisi 50 (Petition of 50), issued in 1980, were moderate and did not target at the authoritarian system as such, but they still criticised concentration of power and over-centralisation.

But it was impossible to fully subdue Muslim mass organisations such as NU and Muhammadiyah because the former was dominated by the popular leaders of thousands of Muslim boarding schools (*pesantren*), especially in Java, and the latter maintained a wide network of esteemed educational institutions and hospitals. In addition, a comprehensive Islamisation propelled to a large extent by Muslim CSOs began in the early 1970s with the revivalist *dakwah* movement (Latif 2005: 390ff). In the early 1980s, a similar *tarbiyah* (education) movement started at various universities (Salman 2006: 190ff).

Global developments since the 1970s effected a mushrooming of CSOs and civil society opposition was becoming palpably stronger from the late 1980s onwards (Ufen 2002, 325ff and 456ff). Many CSO activists who received funding from foreign donors were well acquainted with prevalent liberal discourses on human rights and democracy (Uhlin 1997). Protests were no longer concentrated in urban settings, and in some cases, there were even coordinated nationwide demonstrations. Examples are protests by peasants, students, and CSOs in connection with the construction of the Kedung Ombo dam in Central Java or broad mobilisation after the murder of a labour activist in East Java in 1993 (Aspinall 2005, 139ff). Because trade unions, professional organisations, and political parties were banned or subject to profound restrictions and since state agencies were often incapable or unwilling to advocate for marginalised groups, CSOs assumed some of their responsibilities. CSOs also published the most critical analyses of Indonesian politics and of public issues, while journalists in mainstream media had to be much more cautious.

As of the late 1980s, the regime coalition reacted to the strengthened opposition with co-optation and moderate liberalisation on the one hand, and still with harsh repression on the other. Systematic co-optation was the main function of the powerful Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI), an instrument of Vice President Habibie to recruit Muslim leaders and to establish an influential patronage network (Hefner 1993).

Examples of moderation were the declaration of the 'state philosophy' Pancasila as an 'open ideology' (*ideologi terbuka*), the toleration of some relatively critical political magazines (such as *Tempo*, *Forum Keadilan*, and *Gatra*), the establishment of the quite independent national human rights commission Komnas HAM, the release of some communists or Sukarnoists from prison, and the condoning of various radical CSOs and illegal political parties.

The collapse of the New Order

In the 1990s, civil societal opposition had reached threatening proportions, from the regime's point of view, especially when one considers that the heads of the two largest Muslim organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah – at that time, frequently reform-oriented – were Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais. Wahid, who had a reputation as a neomodernist, liberal Muslim leader, had initiated the Forum Demokrasi, a circle of intellectuals who discussed fundamental reforms, in the early 1990s. Rais, Muhammadiyah chairman since 1995, had become the most powerful critic of the regime. He and Wahid were at that time proponents of what Hefner (2000) termed 'civil Islam'. Whereas the regime grudgingly tolerated high-profile leaders such as Wahid and Rais due to their prominence, radical leaders of illegal organisations, like Sri Bintang Pamungkas (PUDI, Indonesian Democratic Union Party), Muchtar Pakpahan (SBSI, Indonesian Workers Welfare Union), and Budiman Sudjatmiko (PRD, People's Democratic Party) faced detention. Until 1998, the battle between regime and civil society opposition escalated, entailing a radicalisation of some civil society agents and the use of hard repression by security forces. The regime oscillated between co-optation and soft and hard repression, incapable of devising a clear-cut strategy in the face of a dynamically shifting civil society.

Triggered by the Asian economic and financial crisis, with its disastrous effects on the whole economy – bankruptcies, mass unemployment, rapid devaluation of the rupiah, high inflation rates – dissatisfaction with an obviously incapable government, including an ailing President Suharto, rose. From February 1998 to mid-May 1998, student protests all over the country, but usually restricted to campus areas, were growing (Eklöf 1999; Adnan and Pradiansyah 1999). In the final weeks of the New Order, violence by the state security apparatus against protesters, especially student activists, reached unprecedented proportions, including abductions and killings. A faction within the military under General Prabowo even approached Islamist CSOs such as the Dewan Da'wah Islamiyah Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic Propagation Council) to attack rich ethnic Chinese as scapegoats of the financial crisis.

No single organisation was able to speak as representative of the major protest groups. The only common theme in the last weeks of the New Order was a fundamental opposition to Suharto himself and the regime, but what kind of transition would follow was unclear. Student protests across the archipelago and eventually even in front of the parliament building; riots in Jakarta, Medan, and Surakarta; and a peaceful march attracting around 1 million people in Yogyakarta made it clear to New Order elites that fundamental reforms were necessary. The protests by students as well as mass demonstrations in May 1998 served as precipitating events 'that trigger *liberalisation*, spreading the perception among authoritarian elites that they need to open some spaces of freedom in order to avoid an imminent or potential civil war or violent takeover of power by democratic and/or revolutionary actors' (Della Porta 2014, 12).

Eventually, Suharto stepped down on 21 May 1998 in the face not only of protests, but also of an unprecedented economic meltdown and increasing pressure by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), parts of Golkar, the military, as well as the civil administration. While the *Reformasi* movement consisted of a range of organisations, the transition was characterised by a slow assertion of rather conservative agendas. Although the opposition was 'poorly institutionalized, deeply divided, and largely ideologically incoherent' (Aspinall 2005, 5), and many pro-democracy advocates had very vague ideas about the possible course of transition, they were united against corruption and abuse of power by the Suharto regime.

Post-Suharto transition and (de)consolidation

In neopatrimonial and sultanistic regimes, the opposition is usually infiltrated, controlled, programmatically weak, and lacking clear objectives. Only radical activists can challenge the regime from the margins, often illegally, but they can hardly organise opposition. When such strongly personalised regimes collapse, and when, at the same time, the opposition is not unified, it is relatively easy for some of the old-regime elites to seek compromise by aligning themselves with the moderate opposition, whereas radical and lower class opposition cannot take part in the pacted transition. Strong conservative elites can then use money and organisational strength to direct the transition and to impair radical forces. The 'politics of compromise, survivalism, and deal making' under the New Order – that is, many CSO activists' tendency to find niches within the authoritarian system and to acknowledge the legitimacy of the political system enough to avoid repression – was subsequently responsible for the blurring of 'the line between democratic actors and their opponents' (Aspinall 2005, 272).

But at first the collapse of the New Order ushered in a period of heightened social conflict at all levels. Secessionist and regionalist movements such as in Aceh, Papua, and Timor-Leste revived, and all kinds of militias, Islamist groups, ethnic associations, thousands of new non-governmental organisations, independent trade unions, and peasant organisations emerged (Beittinger-Lee 2010, 158ff). The New Order, a strong state at least in terms of its capability of repressing opposition, was replaced by a transition regime grappling with a power vacuum, delegitimated security forces, and great uncertainty over future political developments.

From May 1998 until 1999, the political transition centred on negotiations within the two chambers of parliament, which MPs elected in the rigged 1997 New Order elections still dominated. An informal coalition built by soft-liners in Golkar, the bureaucracy, and the military, together with the major opposition figures, kept radical reformers within civil society at bay. In November 1998, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Abdurrahman Wahid, Amien Rais, and the Sultan of Yogyakarta issued the 'Ciganjur Declaration', signalling their general support for Suharto's successor as president, B. J. Habibie, and his agenda of gradual reforms. Students demanded a radical break with the past, and the 'Ciganjur four' tried to bridge these different camps, knowing quite well that only after elections would they be able to have a strong direct impact. In late 1998, Parliament thus consented to constitutional reforms and to holding free and fair elections in June 1999.

Whereas this transition was mostly pacted, CSOs could flourish (Beittinger-Lee 2010, 115ff). O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986, 48ff) describe a 'resurrection of civil society' once authoritarian rule breaks down. In Indonesia, issue-oriented CSOs took advantage of the political uncertainty during transition and started to have an impact upon policy-making (Eldridge 2005; Hadiwinata 2009; Nyman 2009; Mietzner 2013). The shifting terrain of political parties, elections, parliamentary and military reform, human rights (Setiawan 2021), etc. opened up a range of new opportunities, especially as foreign funding increased significantly. Labour and the land rights movements (Anugrah 2019), for example, succeeded at least partially in impacting policies and amplifying formerly marginalised voices. Despite fragmentation, unions shaped public policy by using 'street politics' as a 'decisive tactic' (Caraway and Ford 2020, 181; see also Caraway's chapter in this volume). But these networks that coalesced into a social movement with strong associational power (Caraway and Ford 2020, 184) are only partly testament to the strength of civil society, as they lacked strong institutionalised links to policy-makers.

The new elites did all they could to restrain opposition, to slow down reforms, and to instigate or cooperate with anti-democratic parts of civil society (Beittinger-Lee 2010). In consequence, 'particularly since 2008, civil society has assumed a largely defensive posture. The focus of its post-2008 activism has not been on further democratic opening, but on fending off attempts by conservative factions in the elite to roll back already implemented reforms' (Mietzner 2012, 219).

For example, the military has been much less powerful since 1999 than during the New Order: it has come under increasing pressure because of previous human-rights violations, has lost its reserved parliamentary seats and parts of its half-legal business empire, and has had to abandon the dual function (*dwifungsi*) that previously guaranteed it major influence on all levels of government. Yet the armed forces have still staved off comprehensive civilian control. Meanwhile, the governments of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14) and Joko Widodo (since 2014) have tightened control of CSOs by regulating foreign funding and by new legislation that requires social organisations to register with government agencies and allows the government arbitrarily to ban CSOs (Mietzner 2021, 170).[1] Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Front Pembela Islam or FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) were then banned.[2] Many pro-democratic activists in general supported the move, but the authoritarian approach in prohibiting these large organisations reminded activists of their own fragile position.

Especially since the mid-2010s, an ambivalent, often even extremely anti-democratic mobilisation of civil society actors has occurred. Limited optimism regarding the role of civil society in democratisation has given way to an increasingly ambivalent or sceptical view in recent years, and a perception of democratic backsliding (Diprose et al. 2019; Power and Warburton 2020). Some civil society actors even have had a significant role in engendering social polarisation, and they have been key supporters of an anti-pluralist populism propagated by presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto.

In general, Islamist groups were forced to keep a low profile under Suharto but gained in strength in the 1990s and 2000s in the wake of general Islamisation. Bourchier (2019) interprets this as a long-term shift towards a more conservative religious nationalism. A part of the Muslim community turned to extra-parliamentary mobilisation. Especially during direct elections, the mixture of street demonstrations and cooperation with highly electable candidates proved to be a successful strategy. In this vein, Tomsa and Setijadi (2018) show that political activism outside the usual partisan channels is nowadays instrumental for the success of candidates, especially during presidential campaigns. This is a result not only of the dealignment and organisational weakness of political parties, but also of the new social media's circumventing old, established forms of political communication (Tapsell 2020).

All in all, social polarisation between moderate groups and Islamists, spurred on by populist discourse at the national level ahead of and during presidential and some local elections, has increased pressure on pro-democracy groups (Hefner 2019; Mietzner 2021, 6ff). The polarisation started immediately after Suharto's downfall. Then-defence minister and commander of the armed forces Wiranto mobilised violent civil society groups against demonstrating students in November 1998 (Feillard and Madinier 2011, 142). This was the origin of the FPI, which gained a dubious reputation for raids on 'places of sin' such as bars and discotheques in the following years. FPI used the widening civil society space to organise those who had existed underground in student circles or at the margins of New Order society (Ufen 2016; Arifianto 2020). In recent years, groups such as FPI and the National Movement to Safeguard the Fatwa–Indonesian Council of Ulama (GNPF-MUI) have been instrumental for the defeat of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (a.k.a. Ahok) in the 2017 gubernatorial elections in Jakarta (but see also Padawangi's chapter in this volume). CSOs like the Indonesian Muslim Communication Forum (Forkami), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and the Muslim Community Forum (FUI) have contributed to a marked politicisation of religious issues. The 2019 presidential elections were, like the 2014 ones, characterised by very strong polarisation between conservative Islamic and Islamist forces on the one hand, and secular and moderate forces on the other.

Especially in the 2010s and 2020s, democratic recession was epitomised by shrinking civic spaces. Controversies around corruption issues and labour laws offer examples. Resistance by civil society activists to counter attempts at weakening the Anti-Corruption Agency (KPK) had been strong enough for over a decade (Setiyono and McLeod 2010), but in 2019, in spite of large demonstrations, a reform of the anti-corruption law debilitating the KPK was finally passed. Other nationwide protests against the Omnibus Law 2020 (or Job Creation Act), containing revisions of 79 existing laws, were also doomed to fail when Parliament finally accepted the bill. Although CSOs are able to influence legislation, political and administrative elites make essential decisions independently, reducing the involvement of civil society to the minimum necessary. At least the powerful student movement behind the protests in 2019 united pluralist and Islamist groups in an unprecedented form (Mietzner 2021, 171).

In sum, CSOs have been able to widen their room for manoeuvre since 1998. Yet, the impact of decidedly pro-democratic civil society groups on policy-making and on general political discourse has been mixed. Civil society has been highly fragmented, with 'almost every subset of civil society … characterized by atomization' (Aspinall 2013, 35) at the local and national levels. In recent years, it seems that reactionary groups have been gaining new ground. The co-existence of ideologically diverse groups has contributed to nationwide social polarisation.

CSOs and regime change in Malaysia

Civil society in Malaysia was less mobilised and politicised under colonial rule than in Indonesia. After independence, an electoral authoritarian regime aggressively controlled CSOs, although it was less repressive than Indonesia's New Order. But beginning in the late 1990s, the broad *Reformasi* movement demanded a fundamental political opening. Since the mid-2000s, a new movement for electoral reform (Bersih) has been able to bundle diverse groups. Moreover, it has been generally accepted among CSOs that any transition would take place within the existing political system via elections and a focus on party competition. Prime Minister Najib Razak (2009–18) was forced to leave office after surprising, but not revolutionary elections. From 2018 until 2020, under a reform-oriented government, the new opposition intensively mobilised anti-liberal groups to protest certain reform policies. Since the breakdown of this government in 2020, COVID-19 regulations have constrained civic space markedly.

Decolonisation and the slow activation of civil society

In contrast to Indonesia's, the nationalist movement in British Malaya was relatively weak, resulting in much less political mobilisation of civil society (Roff 1967). National independence in 1957 was not achieved after a war against the colonial power but was conceded to the Alliance, a coalition of the ethnically based parties – UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) – representing mostly the elites of their respective communities. Within each ethnic group, the British fostered those who supported a controlled transition towards independence against the rising political left (Jomo and Todd 1994: 88ff). Moreover, as of 1948, the British banned national trade unions, including the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions, as they worked to suppress the Communist Party of Malaya during an emergency period that lasted until 1960. The emergency led 'to a severe crackdown on all left-wing groups and subsequent large-scale arrests of their activists' (Ahmad Fauzi 2007: 387). Afterwards, the Socialist Front (1957–66), consisting of the left-wing Partai Rakyat and the Labour Party, was systematically restrained until the coalition collapsed.

A relatively weak, ethnically segregated civil society, mostly contained by a relatively strong 'administrative state' (Esman 1972) was for a long time characteristic. Malaysia's religious CSOs were much smaller than NU and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. The strength of Islamic CSOs has grown with the rise of the revivalist *dakwah* movement (Nagata 1984; Zainah 1987) that began to spread from the largest universities throughout society in the early 1970s. The regime reacted with a strategy of co-optation. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad recruited one of the leading figures of this movement, Anwar Ibrahim from the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), into his cabinet. Together they pressed ahead with promoting a slow and comprehensive Islamisation of the state apparatus, political culture, and party politics. In this way, a once-oppositional Islamic movement consisting of radical anti-liberal, but also genuine anti-authoritarian activists was redirected, and a conservative interpretation of Islam could serve as antidote to religiously tolerant groups demanding pro-democratic reforms.

The *dakwah* movement was also a result of the expansion of educational institutions and socio-economic change with new classes (industrial workers, entrepreneurs, middle class) each claiming their interests and gradually challenging the aristocracy and bureaucrats. Another reaction was, much like in Indonesia, a burgeoning landscape of issue-oriented CSOs. The general impact on policies of these CSOs working on environmental, women's, labour, human rights, consumer's, and religious issues was circumscribed (Weiss and Saliha 2003; Weiss 2006, 81ff; Giersdorf and Croissant 2011, 8). The regime not only tolerated many of their activities but also at times constrained political space by means of hard repression, for example against university students who had demonstrated together with farmers in Baling, Kedah, against declining rubber prices, and eventually by amending the 1971 Universities and University Colleges Act

(UUCA) in 1975. When CSO activists demanded radical reforms and were perceived as threatening to the regime, they were severely punished. In October 1987, in a campaign called Operasi Lalang ('Weeding Operation'), the government detained more than 100 people without trial for as long as two years under the Internal Security Act. Many of them were from opposition parties and CSOs. In this case, a power struggle within UMNO had spilled over to the civil society.

From Reformasi to Bersih

Such a spill-over effect was also characteristic of the *Reformasi* movement. At the height of the Asian financial and economic crisis, a rift emerged within UMNO, personified by tensions between Prime Minister Mahathir and his deputy Anwar Ibrahim. A dormant civil society woke up – initially organised by Anwar himself – and demanded major political reforms (Weiss 2006, 127ff). This was obviously inspired by Indonesia's *Reformasi* in 1998. Malaysia's reform movement had a major liberating effect on the political culture at large because the protests united people from different social backgrounds and across ethnic and religious cleavages. With hundreds of new websites, discussion groups, Internet newspapers, etc., activists could communicate directly and circumvent official media (George 2007; Tan and Zawawi 2008).

The Malaysian *Reformasi* movement found its organisational form in alliances such as Gagasan Demokrasi Rakyat (Coalition for People's Democracy), or Gagasan, mostly comprising CSOs, and the Gerakan Keadilan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement for Justice), or Gerak, consisting of CSOs, the DAP (Democratic Action Party), and the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) (Ufen 2009). In contrast to Indonesia, opposition to the regime quickly linked itself in one way or another to political parties. Opposition parties were relatively well organised and had long been able to fundamentally challenge the government programmatically, and at times, even at the ballot box. Whereas trade unions, professional and student organisations, religious groups, and many other CSOs had mostly been tightly controlled, political parties had had enough leeway to formulate criticism and sometimes even destabilise the regime in certain regions. It was therefore no wonder that the *Reformasi* movement rapidly channelled its energies into party politics.

In 1999, ahead of and during the national and state elections, opposition parties coalesced in an unprecedented way. The National Justice Party (since 2003, People's Justice Party or Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR), PAS, and the DAP formed the Alternative Front, presenting a multi-ethnic and multi-religious adversary to UMNO and its *Ketuanan Melayu* ('Malay Supremacy') rhetoric. PAS is deeply rooted in religious networks, especially in the states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, which have a very high proportion of Muslim Malays. The National Justice Party was the foremost *Reformasi* product, established in 1999, and consisting not only of Anwar and his followers from UMNO, but also of activists from a range of CSOs, including a strong faction from ABIM. The DAP represents especially ethnic Chinese voters in urban and semi-urban areas dissatisfied with the perceived political hegemony of Malay political leaders. Civil society activists supported the electoral campaign and many even joined the opposition parties that became the nucleus of the *Reformasi* movement.

A transition by elections necessitates a strong, cohesive, comprehensive opposition coalition built by political parties, but this coalition is much stronger when it is supported by CSOs (Bunce and Wolchik 2010; Ufen 2020). This logic of 'particisation' bears the advantage of combining forces. CSOs can help sensitise voters to unfair practices in elections, inform the public about problematic government policies, and organise protests against the regime during critical junctures.

Although the Alternative Front lost in the 1999 elections, and despite the subsequent disastrous performance of opposition parties in the 2004 elections, the momentum of *Reformasi* has never completely vanished. The experiences of 1998–99 uncovered the potential strength of a variegated but temporarily united movement consisting of political parties and hundreds of smaller groups and organisations that were never fully controllable. They have reorganised dynamically, whereas the regime often seemed to be static, heavy-handed, overconfident, and unable to grasp the mood on the ground.

The intensification of the struggle between the regime and opposition came with the establishment and rise of Bersih (Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil, or Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections), a coalition of CSOs (Govindasamy 2015; Chan 2018; Khoo Y. H. 2021; Khoo B. T. 2021). Ahead of the 2008 elections, major demonstrations organised by Bersih and the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) (Noor 2008; Kaur 2014) were instrumental in new opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat's achieving impressive gains (Weiss 2009; Govindasamy 2015). In November 2007, HINDRAF attracted up to 30,000 people in Kuala Lumpur to protest against the marginalisation of ethnic Indians, most of whom are Hindus. This was the first time in Malaysian history that this ethnic group was able to articulate its fundamental dissatisfaction with a polity they experienced as characterised by illegitimate Malay supremacy. Whereas HINDRAF had an agenda directed at a specific ethnic group, Bersih claimed to speak on behalf of all Malaysians worried about the state of (electoral) politics. Leaders of opposition parties and CSOs formed Bersih as the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform in 2005 and held their first mass rally in November 2007. In April 2010, the organisation renamed itself as Bersih 2.0 and cut ties to political parties. Thus, Bersih transformed into a non-partisan social movement intending to represent the whole society. The next rally, Bersih 2 in July 2011, drew support from dozens of CSOs, including the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) and the Malaysian Bar Council. Bersih formulated eight demands for free and fair elections and called for a strengthening of public institutions and an end to corruption, thus widening its original agenda substantially. Bersih 3, in April 2012, supported by more than 80 CSOs, was not banned, but the regime hindered 200,000 demonstrators from entering Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) in Kuala Lumpur to join the protest.

All told, Bersih signified a transformation of contentious politics in Malaysia. Tens of thousands of demonstrators had taken part in five mass rallies uniting diverse CSOs across ethnic and religious cleavages. The effort tremendously widened civic space by popular dissent against a government unable to contain the protests. Whereas the government at the start reacted heavy-handedly, with roadblocks, tear gas, water cannons, and mass arrests, they were much more reticent during the Bersih 4 and 5 protests in 2015 and 2016, probably because of international pressure and the conviction that violence could instigate further protests.

Bersih mobilised such large crowds with the help of social media. Since the late 1990s, civil society has increasingly used the Internet to articulate opposition views, to criticise the government, and to organise resistance (see Lim, this volume). Without the enormous expansion of virtual information channels, civil society would not have been so powerful and *Reformasi* would not have been possible. The Internet opened up new opportunities and 'facilitated greater communication and cooperation between disparate groups in civil society and … across ethnic lines' (Abbott 2004, 98). The regime was slow in responding to the social media challenge, but it started in the 2010s to employ thousands of cyberbullies, hackers, Internet trolls, etc. (Leong 2021, 5), contributing to social polarisation. So far, civil society activists have found ways to circumvent the pressure with the help of smartphones and a shift to closed messaging groups (Tapsell 2018; Cheong 2020, 77).

All in all, religious groups, students, professional organisations, and other CSOs have sustained a discourse on human rights and democracy (Khoo 2014). Pro-democratic CSOs have been important in promoting minority rights and stressing good governance. They have contributed to undermining the cultural hegemony of conservative Malay Muslims by connecting themselves to a transnational discourse of civil liberties and democratisation. To be sure, there is also a tendency within Malaysian Islam to support pro-democratic reforms; examples are the reformist faction within PAS that formed the National Trust Party (Amanah or Parti Amanah Negara) in 2015, as well as ABIM and the liberal organisation Sisters in Islam, but these groups were not hegemonic and grew less visible after 2018. CSOs were particularly helpful in promoting electoral reform, organising large-scale protests, and increasingly also propagating fundamental institutional and political reforms. Bersih was not only at times close to political parties but was also capable of distancing itself from party politics in order to maintain its strategic role. In any case, Bersih was instrumental in energising the opposition coalition. Ahead of the 2018 elections, the Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan), consisting of Amanah, DAP, PKR, and the United Indigenous Party of Malaysia (Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, PPBM or Bersatu), was so comprehensive (as indicated by the number and the competitiveness of its candidates), cohesive (with respect to the ideological proximity of coalition partners and the behavioural routinisation of cooperation among these partners), and socially well-rooted (in terms of linkages to voters/supporters and to civil society networks or organisations) that it could win in the elections (Ufen 2020).

Arguably, without *Reformasi* and then Bersih, opposition parties would not have won the elections in 2018. These two movements have helped to link party grassroots, CSO activists, and ordinary Malaysians, to imbue the public with a sense of urgency with respect to democratic reforms, and to invent new strategies for how to challenge the regime effectively.

Growing polarisation of civil society

As Della Porta notes, 'social movements contribute to democratization only under certain conditions'; they may not only destabilise authoritarian regimes but may also trigger 'an intensification of repression or the collapse of weak democratic regimes' (Della Porta 2014, 13). In Malaysia, many CSOs have indeed promoted autocratisation.

In reaction to strengthened pro-democratic civil society activities, Prime Minister Najib's government cooperated with Malay supremacists demanding the defence of Malay and Muslim hegemony (Ufen 2016; Ufen 2022). Well-known Malay-chauvinist or Islamist groups at that time included Perkasa (Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa, Indigenous Empowerment Organisation) (Govindasamy 2015); Pembela (Pertubuhan-pertubuhan Pembela Islam, Organisation for the Defence of Islam); Isma (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia, Malaysian Muslim Network); Pekida (Pertubuhan Kebajikan dan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia, Islamic Missionary and Welfare Association), an officially registered institution with links to the Malaysian underworld (Lemière 2014, 100); and the National Silat Federation, Pesaka, which organised a rally of so-called Red Shirts in reaction to the Bersih 4 rally. These 'Red Shirts' assaulted Bersih supporters and the media during the Bersih convoy ahead of the Bersih 5 rally. They also gathered around 4,000 supporters to confront the Bersih 5 protesters.

Opposition in Malaysia usually has not been violent, and the regime has in most cases relied upon relatively soft means of repression. Even the harsher measures against Bersih demonstrators were replaced by softer ones due to extensive media coverage and fierce criticism in and outside of the country. If one accepts that the elections in 2018 signify a regime change (or at least a fundamental re-start of the electoral authoritarian regime with shifting coalitions and a range of new actors), it has been a peaceful, relatively smooth form of transition by elections.

After the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition had taken over the government, groups opposing reforms gained the upper hand at least in 'street politics' (Ufen 2021). In December 2018, the Islamic Defenders Movement (Gerakan Pembela Ummah) organised protests against the ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). The new government finally renounced ratifying the ICERD in the face of a major demonstration planned by UMNO and PAS. Moreover, UMNO and PAS signed a *Piagam Muafakat Nasional* (National Consensus Charter) in September 2019 and held a 'Muslim Unity Rally'.

The permanent threat of mobilisation of Malay supremacist and Islamist groups forced the PH to initiate reforms with great caution and sometimes to put them on ice. CSOs, especially Bersih, were involved in devising proposals to address government-led reform recommendations, for instance on political financing and on strengthening electoral transparency (Dettman and Gomez 2020), and the PH government established committees and advisory councils on such issues as national education, domestic violence, and enhancing the autonomy of public watchdog institutions such as the Election Commission and Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, yet 'the biggest let-down was in its not repealing the draconian laws that had hung over civil society for decades' (CSO Platform for Reform Members 2020, 68). When the PH government was toppled in 2020, Bersih was incapable of organising mass protests in response – partly because the COVID-19 pandemic further curtailed civic space with restrictions on rights to assemble.

The defeat of the BN in 2018 signified a major transformation of the political system, especially with respect to the configuration of political parties and the competitiveness of elections, notwithstanding how quickly the BN and new allies came back to power. Ironically, from 2018 onwards, it has seemed that CSOs opposing the PH government gained the upper hand within civil society, in the name of an exclusivist approach of defending *Ketuanan Melayu* and *Ketuanan Islam*. The transition in Malaysia is today stuck in limbo, and it is unclear whether democratisation or autocratisation will prevail. Developments since 2020 have been marked by political instability due to governments' being built on very slim majorities from among a disunited coalition, against the background of swift strategic turns of political parties, factions, and individual politicians.

Concluding remarks

This comparison of two Southeast Asian countries elucidates some of the dynamics of CSOs' political engagement, shaped by such factors as ideological and social cleavages, legacies of nationalist and anti-colonial mobilisation, and the type of authoritarian control. The strong nationalist movement in Indonesia was anti-colonial, but not always pro-democratic. This was obvious in the 1950s, when many *aliran*-based CSOs connected to political parties increasingly drifted in different directions and thus contributed to undermining the coalition governments of the parliamentary democracy. In 1965–66, some segments of civil society were involved in the annihilation of the PKI and its supporters. During the New Order period, CSOs were either directly dependent upon the authoritarian state or were forced to focus on specific issues. Some groups were instrumentalised by the military regime. In 1998, student protests, the substantial support of groups within larger CSOs such as NU and Muhammadiyah, and cracks among regime elites prepared the ground for transition. Factions within the military, the bureaucracy, the business elite, and regime party Golkar were increasingly open to demands for reforms the *Reformasi* movement articulated. In the end, in May 1998, the economic and financial crisis, in connection with international pressure, elite defections, and riots (that were at least partly instigated by a military faction) led to the fall of Suharto. Afterwards, the transition was pacted, mostly in line with the usual model transitologists present. However, without the sometimes rowdy protests in 1998–99, the existence of powerful new political parties that braced themselves for coming elections, and CSOs serving as watchdogs, constitutional reforms probably would have been watered down. Since the transition, thousands of CSOs have represented diverse interests. However, especially since around 2010, civil society has again grown politically highly polarised, this time in terms of religion. Civil society today is not only very heterogeneous, partly liberal and pro-democratic, but also to some extent consisting of Islamist, ethnicist, and openly anti-democratic organisations. Links to political parties (not to single politicians) are weaker than in the 1950s, but certain groups – for example, Islamist ones – have gained a certain autonomy in relation to an oligarchical system consisting of old business, administrative, military, and party elites (Winters 2014).

In Malaysia, civil society during colonialism was weaker, and national independence was mostly granted by the colonial power. In 1957, an inter-ethnic elite coalition took power, whereas different forms of leftist opposition had already been almost wiped out by the British. After the 1969 elections, racial riots entailed violent conflict mostly between ethnic Malays and ethnic Chinese. This resulted in a state of emergency and the curtailment of political rights and civil liberties. Class cleavages were subdued, and ethnic conflict channelled into a Malay hegemony controlled via a new ruling coalition inclusive of some former opposition parties. The Islamic revival starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s challenged the government, which reacted with co-optation and Islamisation of state and society. The regime has since used Islamic and ethnicist (especially Malay chauvinist) CSOs to threaten or corner oppositional CSOs. The *Reformasi* movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s consisted of liberal Muslims as well as religiously conservative PAS members, and of CSO activists with diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, often belonging to a well-educated urban middle class. The movement questioned the authoritarian political system and UMNO's hegemony broadly. The government tightened control, but the movement lingered on. Bersih was then able to develop effective strategies for contentious politics. The government mobilised anti-liberal groups but ultimately failed to contain the protests. Bersih's engagement helped opposition parties finally to win national elections in 2018. After 2018, the new opposition, consisting of former regime parties, mobilised anti-liberal, Islamist, and ethnicist CSOs to protest against some of the government's policies.

In both countries, CSOs have contributed to advancing discourses of human rights and democracy, getting salient political issues on the agenda and crafting new policies, building links to political parties and the state administration, and pressuring authoritarian elites to liberalise and reform the polity, during as well as after transition, to counter reactionary forces. The analysis here thus stresses the important role of CSOs during regime change, in contrast to regime-transition literature that focuses on elite bargaining. But it also cautions against an overly optimistic view of CSOs. CSOs often have no clear political agenda or change substantially over time. They frequently consist of factions with different objectives. NU and Muhammadiyah, for example, have represented liberal, moderate, conservative, and reactionary Muslims at the same time. CSOs with ambiguous or hostile stances towards democracy often mobilise against politicians they perceive as liberal reformers. Today, civil societies are highly polarised, and many CSOs have contributed to democratic backsliding in Indonesia and helped to halt democratisation in Malaysia.

Notes

1 They were hardly represented by political parties because it became necessary for candidates to raise substantial funds for election campaigns, making it impossible for most civil society actors to run successfully for seats in the national parliament (Boudreau 2009).

2 At the same time, Jokowi and Vice President Ma'ruf Amin became honorary members of the notorious Pemuda Pancasila (Pancasila Youth) and receive full protection, according to its chair, Yapto Soerjosoemarno (Tempo 2021).

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