

# Civil Society, Religious Affiliation and Political Participation in East Asia

Alternative sources of legitimacy, such as the ones encompassed in civil society or religion, (re-) appear and interact with classical political mechanisms in local political fields, while democracies across the world face challenges regarding representation. The growing influence of civil society in the public sphere is widely held in positive regard, while religions provoke defiant reactions, especially when Islam is at stake. The ICAS3 panel this article means to introduce builds upon examples drawn from across East Asia to show that civil society is not a 'natural' way through which contemporary societies can eventually voice peaceful political discontent, nor is religion a univocal departure from politics. The relationship between civil or religious organizations and politics is a multi-faceted one and has not been given enough attention in the analyses of the East Asian context, which often focuses on economic modernization or the developmental state.

Agenda >  
East Asia

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Today, civil society is quite a fashionable notion, as attested by its wide resurgence in the academic and political worlds since the dismantlement of the communist block.<sup>1</sup> Bi- and multilateral agencies, never tired of emphasizing civil society's discourse and organizations part in the 1980s-1990s political transitions, have turned civil society into a tool for democracy assistance programmes. Civil society has become a box to tick on the bureaucratic checklist of the righteous path to development. This evolution is noticeable in the growing discourse on civil society, which tends to be both normative and depoliticized – casting non-governmental organizations, and associations as the incarnation of the virtuous populace.<sup>2</sup> Analyses of religion have been undergoing an opposite evo-

lution. For decades social sciences held that religious practice mainly provided for social integration and harmony. While it may have made a modest contribution to consensus building and to supplying meaning and identity for individuals, it surely had no salient political implications. Religion's part was thus played down in the study of political configurations as a long-lasting consequence of the secularization theory and of functionalist structuralism.<sup>3</sup> The disruptive and highly political potential of religious systems of meaning and organizations was thus underestimated. Today however, religions are no longer regarded as neutral with respect to politics. This recent backlash is due to the importance of religious input in democratization processes particularly in Eastern Europe, but also in the increasing prominence of Islamic political projects, from the 1979 Iranian Revolution onwards. The somewhat excessive attention for Islam has concealed what other religions, including non-revealed, pantheistic ones, can contribute to our understanding of contemporaneous changes in the relationship between society, politics, and religion.

There is thus a theoretical need to further explore political implications of the increasing normativization of the notions of civil society and religion, especially outside the European and American cradle of modernity. The upcoming panel is unique in the way that it presents papers by young researchers (completing or having just completed their PhDs) working on these problems in East Asian situations. The panellists all

shared the experience that the obverse point our fields imposed on us was the renegotiation of political participation, phrased in terms of civil society or religious affiliation.

In China for instance, state-society relations can be seen historically as the relationship between the official state religion and local cult associations – a relationship characterized by cooptation, mutual penetration, and repression of 'heterodox' cults. This model has been challenged with the relative opening of the public space and economic transformation. The possibility of speaking of a civil society in the Chinese situation will be debated in two papers, one paper assessing the extent to which political power and social organization in China remains defined in religious terms; the other documenting the growing public involvement among entrepreneurs, based on the case of the Zhejiang province.

Simultaneously, Cambodian Buddhism is being reinvented and used as a form of cultural capital for the re-creation of community and politics, after the violence of the Khmer Rouge era. In the Malay Muslim world, religion also appears instrumental in voicing discontent as well as shared ideals, in the context of claims for Reformasi (reform) in Malaysia and Indonesia. Though different both in their movements' sociology and projects, Malaysian and Indonesian Islamists are concerned with countering and/or co-opting concepts such as 'democracy', 'human rights' or 'civil society', by Islamizing them. As they increasingly influence the public debate, Malay Islamists sketch out cross-border discursive genealogies and a regional theory of Islamic political participation, as will be discussed in the fourth and fifth contributions. <

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## Notes >

- 1 Extensively documented by Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge (Mass.), London: MIT Press (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought) (1992).
- 2 Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway (ed.), *Funding Virtue. Civil Society and Democracy Promotion*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2000).
- 3 Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris: Gallimard (NRF) (1985); Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1951).