

MALAYSIA

State and Civil Society in Transition

VIDHU VERMA

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1

Introduction

In this book I describe and analyze the role of state and civil society in Malaysia in two contexts: globalization and changes in the concept of nation-state. Today globalization is changing economic relations among individuals, corporations, and nation-states by integrating markets and technologies to an extent never witnessed before; it signifies changes in national economies through the creation of a more interconnected world.¹ The process of economic globalization has given rise to uncontrollable market forces and institutions like transnational corporations that owe loyalty to no nation-state. It is crucial to understand how this trend influences states and societies; to understand politics in the context of globalization is to understand the state and its relation to civil society.

Many globalization theorists assert the need to reevaluate the modern nation-state as a political, economic, and cultural unit because it is widely acknowledged that we live in an age when national cultures, national economies, and national sovereignty are fluid.² This assertion has special significance in Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia, where the concept of nation never provided an adequate analytical mode for conceptualizing social relations. Thus the claim that the nation-state is being rendered obsolete by contemporary developments does not hold true. At the same time, change is occurring via the dynamics of the global economy, as well as the rapid growth of transnational links that has implications for the growth of civil society and democracy: regional and global interconnectedness impacts key notions of accountability, popular participation, and the rights and duties of citizens.

The idea of civil society has a long intellectual tradition in Western political theory and is associated with autonomous space in society, distinct from and independent of the authority of the state.³ But not until the 1980s and 1990s did the concept of civil society find common usage due to the collapse of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; thereafter it was proclaimed a necessary condition for any transition to democracy.

Currently, the role of civil society is popularly reinterpreted as protecting individual liberty and is broadly identified as an arena of freedom outside the state—a space for individual autonomy, voluntary associations, and plurality in an era marked by market economies and political democracies. John Keane has formulated the recent trends in political theory:

The emerging consensus that civil society is a realm of freedom correctly highlights its basic value as a condition of democracy; where there is no civil society there cannot be citizens with capacities to choose their identities, entitlements and duties within a political-legal framework. (Keane 1998, 114)

In contemporary political discourse, the idea of civil society represents a spontaneous order, a set of associations and communal bodies that acts as a buffer between state power and its citizens. Under this understanding of participatory democracy, civil society would include associations—soccer teams, theater groups, households, trade unions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious groups—irrespective of their goals, aims, and relationship to individual freedoms. This participatory conception of civil society is popular with social activists, modern libertarian radicals, and free-market believers who, despite other disagreements, converge on the aim to protect civil society from encroachment by the state and bureaucratic administrations.⁴

In another rights-based conception, civil society is defined as the domain of institutions and associations that exist outside the state but possess a legal and institutional structure of their own like hospitals, schools, and neighborhood councils. They proceed within the boundaries of the rule of law and seek to institute equal rights of citizenship. Thus the concept of civil society has been proposed as a source of as well as an arena for democratic associations separate from and opposed to the interests of the state. Despite these two broad conceptions, the term *civil society* is fairly ambiguous and has raised many contentious issues about its internal boundaries, constituents (NGOs, political parties, associations, etc.), basic principles, separation from the state, and relationship with religious and political institutions. Moreover, because both state and civil society organizations are made up of large, complex organizations, the boundaries between the two are not always crystal-clear.

What is broadly agreed upon is that the differences between state and civil society that emerge from this debate are a special characteristic of the countries of the West, for example France, the United States, and United Kingdom, where there is a well-developed tradition of democratic rights and limited state power. More recently, Robert Putnam has proposed the existence of “social capital” as the mechanism through which civil society was created and maintained by emphasizing features of social organization

which improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions—such as trust, norms and networks (Putnam 1993, 169).⁵ Just as there are differences in the development of civil society and social capital within countries in the West, so too are there differences in patterns of consolidating democracy in other parts of the world.

Countries in Southeast Asia share some but not all the processes that accompanied the emergence of the modern state and civil society in the West: the erosion of traditional norms, rapid industrialization and urbanization, and rapid population growth. Spurred by recent work, many observers contend that the lagging democratization in countries like Malaysia is due to the absence or stunting of a civil society and its corresponding political culture. Some even dismiss its potential for the evolution of a democratic society. Such assertions will be critically examined here to argue that Malaysia is currently going through civil society-building and democratization. But the democracy that evolves out of this process will be shaped and conditioned by a different set of institutions and religious norms from those found in the West.

I endorse the widely accepted view that the development of civil society in the West is part of the same historical process that saw the rise of modern democracy. The concept of civil society is based on the following premises: The ultimate unit of social life is the individual, who is also the sovereign in making choices about the organizations, associations, and institutions he wishes to join; social and political associations in a society are autonomous; and pluralism is defined by identities freely chosen and not defined by religious moral bonds. But given the contemporary transformation of the world in the age of globalization, any consideration should also take into account those parts of the world where historical bonds and premises can be only partly established.

There are several reasons why the comparative historical tradition of research on civil society appears to offer a foundation for constructing a satisfactory theoretical account of the conditions of democracy. Although civil society unfolded simultaneously with the process of industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of citizenship and the modern nation-state in the West, it also has considerable analytical usefulness in studying democratization in many non-Western countries.

First, recent scholarship tells us that the distinction between civil society and state in the Western tradition is relevant because the unfettered expansion of the state that posed an obvious threat to civil society also becomes one of its safeguards (see Hall 1995, 20–21). Given that the Malaysian state is too dominant in reorganizing its citizens' lives, this distinction is relevant in understanding how the balance of power between state and society can be altered and the process of democratization can be established and sustained.