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 debate will continue to be of importance in terms of state-society relations, especially when Islam is at stake. The ICAS Panel on this issue aims to bring together insights and experiences 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 political participation 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.

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oday, civil society is quite a fashionable notion, as attest- ed by its wide resurgence in the academic and political world, since the dismantlement of the communist bloc. Bi- lateral and multilateral agencies, never tired of emphasizing civil society’s discourse and organizations part in the 1980s-1990s political transitions, has 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.5

Analyses of religion have been undergoing an opposite evo- lution. For decades social sciences held that religious practice was unrelated to political disenfranchisement and harmony.4 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 past was thus played down in the study of political configurations as a long-lasting consequence of the secularization theory and of functionalist structuralism.6 The disruptive and highly polit- ical potential of religious systems of meaning and organiza- tion is thus underestimated. Today, however, religion is 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 proj- ects, from the 1979 Iranian Revolution onwards. The some- what excessive attention for Islam has concealed what other religions, including non-revealed, pantheistic ones, can contribute to our understanding of contemporary changes in the relationship between society, politics, and religion.

There is thus a theoretical need to further explore political implications of the increasing normalization 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, phasing out civil society or religious affiliation.

In China for instance, state-society relations can be seen historically as the relationship between the official state religi- on and local cult associations – a relationship character- ized by proportionate, mutual penetration, and repression of ‘heterodox’ cults. This model has been challenged with the relative opening of the public space and economic transforma- tion. The possibility of speaking of a civil society in the Chinese context will be debated in two papers, one paper assessing the extent to which political power and social organiza tion in China remains defined in religious terms; the other documenting the growing public involvement among entre- preneurs, based on the case of the Zhejiang province.

Simultaneously, Cambodian Buddhism is being reinvent- ed 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 instru- mental 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’ soci- ology and projects, Malaysian and Indonesian Muslims 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.

Juliette Van Wassenhove, MA, is currently preparing a PhD in polit- ical science, on ‘Civil Society in Malaysia and the Philippines: actions, discourses and practices’, at the Centre of International Studies and Research at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques in Paris (EPE-CERI). juliettevan@hotmail.com or jvw@libero.it

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Public Health Care Strategies and Socio-Gene tic Marginalization

The increased public and political concern about developments of new genetic technologies has led to an increased scrutiny of the role played by medical experts and public health authorities in health care systems. Public discussion, recommendations of professional organizations, legislation, and reliable technological assessment are relied upon to prevent any adverse effects on society. It is also important to organize discussions on an international level. The aim of this ICAS Panel, confined to developments in China, Japan, India, and Taiwan, is to make a contribution to that effect.

By Margaret Slocum

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