

Refereed article

## The Claims of the ASEAN to Human Rights and Democracy: What Role for Regional Civil Society?

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### Summary

Reacting to the devastating effects of the Asian financial crisis of 1997/8, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has recently increasingly embarked upon a range of reforms aiming at greater regional integration. At the same time, the various states and societies in Southeast Asia have undergone complex political, economic, and social transformations that have led to greater levels of democratization and more empowered civil society actors, as well as new elites. Consequently, the ASEAN leadership has come under both internal and external pressure to become more inclusive in its decision making and to adopt not only greater economic liberalism but also the political dimensions thereof, of which human rights, democracy, and civil society are all essential features. These principles have gradually been included in ASEAN's regional governance architecture. This article focuses on the role of regional civil society (RCS) in this process of transformation, especially regarding the incorporation of human rights into the normative core of ASEAN. Unlike the criticism that has been spread dismissing RCS as a weak and negligible force due to the authoritarian inclination of ASEAN states, I argue that RCS has actually consistently developed its capacity to shape human rights regionalism in ASEAN. I conclude that RCS exerts always productive power and sometimes also compulsory power — thereby formulating a different regional identity discourse in ASEAN, specifically one that is human rights-conforming. However RCS is indeed weak in terms of institutional and structural power, and thus there is still a long way to go before it becomes a fully empowered actor in the policymaking and political processes of ASEAN.

Manuscript received on 2015-05-26, accepted on 2015-07-09

**Keywords:** ASEAN, human rights, regional civil society, democratization, collective identity, ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, ASEAN Declaration on Human Rights, ASEAN Charter, discourse, power

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<sup>1</sup> The author thanks the Southeast Asian Interdisciplinary Research Group, based at the University of Freiburg and funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), for supporting her research on human rights in Southeast Asia.