

Refereed article

Democratizing ASEAN through “Alternative Regionalism”? The ASEAN Civil Society Conference and the ASEAN Youth Forum

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Summary

This article is situated in the literature on the democratization of international institutions. The research puzzle presented is how civil society can increase participation in a regional organization with mostly nondemocratic member states and which has very limited space for non-state political engagement. This increased participation is seen as a building block for democratization, since it leads to the representation of otherwise marginalized, ignored, or even oppressed groups. The case study examined here is that of a regional organization from the Global South, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) — with its declared goal of becoming a “people-centered” community. Civil society participation can be of particular relevance for such organizations, since some of their member states might be far from representing or even listening to the voices of “their people,” notably if these individuals belong to marginalized or oppositional groups. Based on the concept of “alternative regionalism” (Igarashi 2011), this article examines the efforts to create and widen the space for civil society participation in ASEAN, its challenges, and the potential for the democratization of this regional organization. It is discussed whether the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples’ Forum (ACSC/APF) and the ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF) between them have the potential to democratize ASEAN from below.

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