

# VIOLENCE AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Scholars have increasingly debated conceptualisations of civil society as inherently peaceful and democracy-promoting in recent years. It has been recognised that neither by definition nor empirically is there a clear dividing line that excludes organisations and activities that may promote anti-democratic views or may use violent means (Stacey and Meyer 2005, 2021). While the latter sometimes have been referred to as ‘uncivil society’ (Glasius 2010; Heinrich 2005; Kopecký 2003), suggesting a possible categorisation, the literature has yet not provided any conclusive explanation for why and when actors in civil society choose nonviolence or violence. Broadening the scope to related literatures on social movements, protest, and civil conflict suggests the situation is not much different – nonviolent and violent mobilisation are often studied separately, but commonly theorised as caused by similar factors.

This chapter will begin with a brief overview of these existing theoretical explanations, before moving on to an empirical section that maps the relationship between the use of violence and civil society in Southeast Asia. The focus of that section will be specifically on the types of violent non-state actors visible in the region in the 21st century and the extent to which these organisations and activists can be conceptualised as belonging within civil society space or not. The chapter thus deliberately excludes the vast number of nonviolent civil society organisations (CSOs) in Southeast Asia, except if they have shifted in strategy between nonviolence and violence (or vice versa). The final section reconnects with the theoretical debate and provides some suggestions for further research to advance our understanding about why and when civil society becomes violent.

## **What explains violent non-state actors?**

The burgeoning interest in violent civil society overlaps with recent advances in scholarly work on social movements and civil conflict. Across these different literatures, the most prominent explanations for why violence is used can be roughly classified into three themes, which are not mutually exclusive: mobilisation/recruitment, tactical choice, and the dynamics of contention.

Contemporary scholarship on civil conflict has identified the challenge of rebel recruitment as the key determinant for when and how insurgencies begin, prevail, and succeed

(Gates 2002; Kalyvas 2006). Whether as a defining feature of ethnic or religious conflict (Bormann et al. 2017), so-called new wars (Kaldor 2012), opportunity costs (Fearon and Laitin 2003), greed or grievance (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), or wartime political orders (Staniland 2021), the most important aspect for rebellion is non-state actors' ability to mobilise recruits. The starting point is a recognition that the so-called collective action problem is an even greater challenge for recruitment into violent activism than for mobilisation of nonviolent social movements (Lichbach 1998; Olson 1965; Tarrow 1994). Whereas participation in a social movement or rebellion is costly and risky for the individual – especially if it fails – the potential benefits of a success will be distributed across society. Consequently, a rational individual has incentives to 'free-ride' and avoid the costs of participation.

In general, the collective action problem does not distinguish between recruitment into violent rebellion or nonviolent social movements, and either type of movement can use the same strategies to overcome this problem (Diani 2002; Larson and Lewis 2018). Some measures may, however, be more likely to be used by violent actors. One common approach to address the collective action problem is to offer participants selective incentives (Oliver 1980). These could be in the form of immediate or promised economic rewards and/or social status. Actors who offer participants one-off payments or salaries need access to funds, which can be collected through donations, crime, taxation of local populations or businesses, or from external sponsors, such as other states or communities in exile (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Gates 2002; San-Akca 2016). Organisations can also offer financial and social support for the families of participants who become imprisoned or otherwise victimised because of their activism (Gupta 2020). For movements that lack sufficient resources, another approach to offer credible future awards consists of the establishment of a hierarchical organisation and the appointment of key activists to top positions. Being appointed to an important position within a movement does not only provide information about future influence, but it also immediately conveys greater status to the individual participant (Willer 2009). This practice links the financial rewards and so-called social rewards that come from being recognised as important for a group, as well as the comradeship that exists inside a movement. Research into high-risk activism across different empirical settings has identified such social rewards as arguably more important than payment, especially for the early members of a movement (della Porta 1992; Wood 2003). Both factors may be more likely to be of use to violent than nonviolent actors. The capacity for violence is useful for the ability to raise funds to pay participants, while armed groups tend to organise in more stable hierarchical structures than nonviolent social movements.

The second explanation for why we occasionally see the use of violence by non-state actors emphasises tactical choices from the available 'repertoires of contention' (Tilly 1993). Studies that have gone into greater detail about the tactical choices of social movements have explored this in greater detail than just in terms of a crude distinction between nonviolence and violence (Doherty and Hayes 2019; Tarrow 1993, Schock 2005). It has been suggested that disagreements between radicals and moderates within movements about what tactics to use may cause splits and encourage the former faction to use violence (Haines 1984). While existing political opportunity structures constrain the options for a movement (McAdam et al. 1996), it is generally assumed that an organisation will pick the tactic it thinks will work to achieve its goal. To this end, the factors movement strategists are likely to consider in order to maximise the utility of a given tactic are how popular it is likely to be within the movement and among its

supporters, the state's likely response, and the organisation's capacity to implement the tactic (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Cunningham et al. 2017). This argument, however, is merely a starting point for exploration into specifically why actors decide to choose nonviolence or violence – which remains an understudied question. One possible factor that might influence this choice is that the option of violence may become more attractive when states are unresponsive to the demands of citizens (Gurr 1970). Civil society organisations and movements that propose policies that challenge the ideology or legitimacy that underpin a regime will more likely be ignored or repressed (Staniland 2021). Consequently, these groups have incentives to escalate their actions beyond nonviolent protest to attract more attention or, if they conclude that the government will never be responsive, seek to overthrow the current regime (Vogt et al. 2021). This pattern – that activists who are disappointed by the failure of nonviolent measures form more radical and violent organisations – has been identified in many different settings (della Porta 1995).

Having touched upon the role of political opportunity structures, we come to the third set of explanations for the use of violence by non-state actors. These explanations centre on the dynamics of contention and, in particular, organisations' or movements' experience of repression by state forces. The so-called repression–dissent nexus is a central feature in both the social movement and conflict literature for explaining forms of contention, including the use of violence by non-state groups (Davenport et al. 2019; Moore 1998). In line with the arguments about political opportunities, scholars in this vein note that states can impose restrictions on the freedom of assembly and organisation, and state agents can repress attempts at mobilisation (Boudreau 2004; Tilly 1978). The severity and type of repression used is largely determined by to what extent the regime perceives a given social movement as a threat to their political survival. As such, even states with limited political rights often accept non-threatening civil society organisations, such as, for example, religious and cultural institutions, business-owners' associations, or sports and leisure organisations (Davenport 2008; Tullock 1987). Conversely, civil society organisations and social movements that regimes perceive as greater threats will be met with harsher repression – meaning those that more actively challenge political leaders and are able to attract mass participation (DeNardo 1985; Kim and Bearman 1997). Organisations with the capacity for violence are also often more heavily repressed, although that response is not necessary because states perceive them as greater threats to the regime.

State repression does not, however, always prevent and contain activism; it sometimes backfires and instead facilitates mobilisation. Since violent repression violates social norms, the effect on participants and bystanders may be an increased aversion to living under a regime prepared to attack unarmed protesters, thus motivating further commitment to collective action (Francisco 2004). This process often also pushes individuals towards joining more radical movements. State repression hence increases the probability that activists start using violence (Moore 1998). Having noticed that citizens' disapproval of state repression may offer an opportunity for recruitment, some non-state actors use violence primarily as a strategy intended to provoke the state into indiscriminate repression (Price 1977).

To sum up, non-state actors ranging from armed groups to social movements have been suggested as more likely to use violence if such capacity helps them secure funding, if they consider that tactic as having the greatest chance of success, and/or when they are faced with violent repression. The question remains whether actors that include violence

as part of their repertoire of contention constitute civil society. What is important to note here is that, first, organisations and movements can be involved in many different functions and, second, that even actors who seem to be exclusively involved in violence (such as terrorists) may overlap and interconnect with broader movements. Scholars have, for example, recognised that the presence of a violent radical flank sometimes increases and sometimes decreases the likelihood that a social movement is successful (Chenoweth and Schock 2015; Haines 1984). Consequently, to explore the issue of violence and civil society in Southeast Asia, it is not possible to begin with a pre-set list of civil society organisations and map their relative inclination towards violent behaviour. In what follows, this chapter instead focuses on violent actors in the region (excluding those oriented around pure criminality) and discusses to what extent they and their affiliates are active in civil society space.

### **Violent non-state actors in Southeast Asia**

The country with the most numerous and active violent non-state organisations is Myanmar. The country has experienced a civil war continuously since independence in 1948, which escalated again in 2021 following a military coup d'état. Although the conflict includes armed groups mobilised in terms of both ideology and ethnic minority grievances, the most prominent non-state actors represent the latter category. There are more than a dozen insurgent armies that control some territory in the country. Several have agreed to ceasefires with the government, even though any progress on settling their political issues has been limited. Almost all these groups fulfil functions beyond the armed struggle, but due to their responsibilities as at least partial de facto governing authorities in their areas, it is conceptually difficult to view them as taking up roles within a civil society space outside the state (Keenan 2013).

However, linked to these non-state armed groups is a plethora of activist initiatives by civil society organisations operating in these areas outside effective Myanmar government control, many of them with their main offices in exile. These movements, which address a range of issues, have formed both within different ethnic minority communities and among refugees. Although this has led to a multiplicity of organisations, they have remained connected through institutionalised co-operation and joint projects. Much of the early focus of these groups centred on the situation for refugees and those in exile, discussions about political co-operation against the government, as well as documenting human rights violations by the Myanmar army (Sadan 2013). Over time, activists have broadened the agenda for these efforts, establishing organisations for several additional issues, including gender equality and environmental protection. Because of their anti-government agenda and for pragmatic reasons, much of this nonviolent civil society may overlap and/or have links with violent insurgent organisations. For example, organisations such as the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) and Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) sometimes co-operate with, but also sometimes critique, the activities of the different armed factions controlling the territory where the Karen ethnic group predominates. Besides, with these ethnically based grassroots movements, non-state armed groups in Myanmar have also maintained contact with other activists organising nonviolent protests during military rule, from 1962 to 2011, and after the 2021 coup (Henry 2011). Despite harsh repression from the regime throughout these time periods, such activism to promote human rights and democracy has occasionally coalesced in mass mobilisations against the ruling military. The most

notable such were the democracy movement of 1988–90 and the ‘Saffron Revolution’ in 2007 (Kyaw 2009; Watcher 1989).

During the brief period of partial democracy in the country, from 2011 to 2021, many exile organisations returned to set up offices in the largest city, Yangon, and/or the capital, Naypyidaw (Chan 2017; Morgan 2014). Interestingly, efforts during this decade to negotiate peace with the different armed groups in the country contributed both to expanding the visibility and activity of civil society actors in ethnic minority areas, and to these organisations’ starting to act more independently and to become more critical of the violent representatives of their communities (Cárdenas and Hedström 2021). This opening up of civil society space did not, however, only encourage activists concerned with human rights, environmental pressure, and inequality in the country, but also ‘uncivil society’ groups advocating discrimination and supportive of violent mobilisation. Although the seeds for these movements existed already prior to political reform, the removal of censorship, combined with the rapid spread of social media in the country, made them more visible and allowed them to grow in influence.

Arguably the most prominent example was the role of Buddhist-nationalist activism in the communal violence and army campaigns against the Rohingya and other Muslim minorities that led to thousands of deaths and the displacement of more than a million individuals to Bangladesh and beyond (Chowdhury 2020). Much of the anti-Muslim violence and propaganda was orchestrated by members of the military-linked political organisation, Union Solidarity and Development Association, and some Buddhist monk associations that had been supported by the Myanmar military since the early 1990s. After direct involvement in organising anti-Muslim violence in 2012–15, these activists later focused more on agitating for and encouraging the armed forces in their repression of these communities.

The situation in Myanmar changed completely when the military reclaimed power in February 2021. Soon both existing and newly formed civil society organisations organised mass mobilisations against the coup d’état, using nonviolent means including demonstrations, civil disobedience, online activism and calls for support from the international community (177 Myanmar Civil Society Organizations 2021). However, as the military responded with violent repression, some protesters started to form self-defence militias that eventually evolved into the official establishment of an armed wing by the ‘exile government’, to meet force with force (ICG 2021, Stokke in this volume). Much of the independent stance that ethnic minority civil society had established during the semi-democratic decade was reversed as organisations had to retreat into rural areas or exile and strengthened their connections with the armed groups. Furthermore, many activists from the initially nonviolent opposition to the coup have either adopted violent strategies themselves or established alliances with violent non-state actors (Thawngmung and Noah 2021).

The country in the region with the second-most numerous non-state armed actors is the Philippines, where communist insurgents continue to be active mainly in the north of the country, and Islamists continue to fight in the Mindanao region, despite the government’s having concluded a peace agreement with the most prominent rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF, in 2012. The Communist Party interacts with the local population in the areas it controls in a manner similar to that of the ethnic armed groups in Myanmar, taking up a role more like that of a state than of part of civil society (Rubin 2020). Taking its cue from the Marxist-Leninist concept of a vanguard party, it initially organised and forged links with civil society, including

labour unions and similar associations. Due to a split within the movement in 1992 over tactical choices, most participants in civil society activism left the party; since then, the remaining militants have primarily relied on violent means (Quimpo 2014). Meanwhile, in Mindanao, MILF had focused a lot of effort since its formation on spreading Islamic education and culture, thus creating links with a civil society network. The remaining active groups are, however, either connected with the global Islamic State movement and/or purely focused on the use of violence (Ramakrishna et al. 2021).

Focusing on the vibrant civil society that exists in the Philippines, however, reveals that some CSOs are willing to consider links with violent perpetrators. Activists critical of corruption in politics and the lack of progress in addressing this problem have at times suggested that violent means may be justified, including outright support by some parts of civil society for a failed coup attempt in 2006 (Lorch 2021). A similar tendency was visible around the campaign and subsequent administration of President Duterte: civil society was split between criticising and supporting him, even as he openly embraced repression, censorship, and undermining the accountability of the security forces (Lorch 2021; Rama 2018). These positions can be understood both in light of the visible lack of change in Filipino politics and society, despite the prominent role of civil society, and as a pragmatic strategy, as Duterte has retained high public support (Garrido 2021). It has been difficult to mobilise large parts of the population to criticise the regime's human rights violations since the state has effectively framed these as targeting minorities and dangerous criminals.

The third country in the region with an ongoing insurgency is Thailand, where violent separatists have been active along the Thai–Malaysian border for decades. Despite also decades' worth of attempts by the central authorities to establish full control of Thailand's southern provinces, the porous border has provided an attractive environment for criminal organisations, as well as for both leftist and ethno-religious insurgent movements. While there have been instances of large-scale nonviolent mobilisation, the conflict has since 2004 mainly featured violent tactics (Harish 2006). Since 2014, the situation has stabilised at a level that still includes hundreds of incidents per year and negotiation attempts have been unsuccessful, which can be attributed in part to the fragmented nature of the insurgency (Engvall and Svensson 2020). Their organisational structure has also meant that the insurgents are not active in civil society space.

Another political dispute in Thailand pitted loose coalitions of activists against each other for more than a decade, including interactions that became violent following both lethal repression by state forces and occasional fighting by participants. With Thailand's turn towards democracy in the 1990s, civil society had grown, including in the form of residential and agricultural associations, beyond groups organised around political aims and rights (Connors 1999). Thaksin Shinawatra, prime minister from 2001 to 2006, implemented a new rural development programme and launched a 'war on drugs' campaign in 2003; both initiatives drew criticism from civil society (HRW 2004; Lorch 2021; Pitidol 2016). This pushback formed the background to the conflict from 2006 to 2014 between the 'yellow-shirts' (including the People's Alliance for Democracy, PAD) critical of Thaksin and the pro-Thaksin 'red-shirts' (including the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, UDD). Although most demonstrations were nonviolent, the security forces often responded with violent repression and there were clashes both between protesters and police, and occasionally between participants on the two sides. PAD began as nonviolent demonstrations in support of the 2006 coup but then reconvened to protest the 2007 elections that brought Samak Sundaravej to power.

The protesters called for the army to intervene in politics, as well as supporting the use of force against Cambodia in a border dispute over the area around the Preah Vihear temple (Ockey 2009; Puangthong 2013). The situation continued to escalate after non-violent mass protests by UDD in Bangkok in 2009 met with violent repression by the army. Later, it was reported that among the protesters had been an armed ‘security wing’ that ended up fighting against both government forces and the yellow-shirts (HRW 2011).

Indonesia has no active armed conflict at present, but has a recent history of separatist insurgencies, communal violence, and terrorist attacks. The conflict in Timor-Leste ended with a peace agreement in 1998 and independence in 2002, and the conflict in Aceh ended with a peace agreement establishing greater autonomy in 2005. In Timor-Leste, violence has recurred since independence between factions of the army (or veterans) and thus lacks a direct civil society connection. In Aceh, a terrorist training camp was raided by the police in 2010, but the members of a terrorist network were found to have settled in the region from other parts of the country and had few local connections (Fealy 2010). The conflict in West Papua ended after opposition leaders in 2006 held meetings and engaged in ‘a cost-benefit analysis of the relative effectiveness of different methods’ (Macleod 2014, 71) before they decided to focus primarily on nonviolent action. This tactical shift, however, was only temporary, as there were more than 100 armed interactions in the area from 2010 to 2019 (Lele 2021). As the inclusive nature of decision-making noted above indicates, the West Papuan independence movement combines nonviolent and violent means and is also engaged in civil society space, including activism around cultural and historical matters (Philpott 2018).

Indonesia has suffered several high-profile terrorist attacks by Islamist groups, including those with links to transnational networks such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as several instances of communal violence, often across religious divides. Participants in the former are not directly linked to civil society organisations, in contrast to the latter (Haripin et al. 2020; Suryana 2019). During the same time period, there has been a growth in Islamic civil society mobilisation in the country. Some – but not all – of those movements have at least been inspirational for the perpetrators of violence. Different Islamist social movements have lobbied the government and politicians to advance their political agenda, provided economic and social services in line with *sharia* principles, and engaged in training, but have also organised large-scale protests against perceived immoral behaviour such as Indonesia’s hosting the Miss World pageant in 2013 (Munabari 2017). It is, however, also worth exploring the links these movements have to the regime, in a similar manner to those of the violence-supporting Buddhist civil society in Myanmar. Following democratisation in 1998, then-President Habibie allowed the formation of self-defence militias across the country, some of which adopted Islamist rhetoric but had support from the army, such as the Pam Swakarsa (Barton et al. 2021). Several other prominent organisations had similar backgrounds, including the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council, MUI) and the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders’ Front, FPI), both of which promoted the idea of the adaption of *sharia* law in Indonesia. These organisations were also involved in violent attacks on Christians and on Shi’as and other Muslim sects (Barton et al. 2021; Freedman 2009; Suryana 2019).

These constitute the main countries in the region that have experienced violent activism in the last two decades, although other countries have experienced occasional incidents, as well, including Laos, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Most of these cases, however, are marked by some uncertainty with regard to the perpetrators or what could have led to that type of action.

## **Conclusion**

Taking account of this descriptive mapping of violent non-state activism in Southeast Asia, what can be said regarding the proposed explanations for violent and nonviolent mobilisation with which we began? The first thing to note is that there is little tactical flexibility in the form of civil society groups that start to use violence when they haven't before or that transition solely to nonviolence if they previously have used force. The main example of a process of escalation is in Myanmar after the 2021 coup d'état. In that case, the original mobilisation was completely nonviolent, but state repression led to the radicalisation of the movement. When it comes to movements that stop using violence, the often used example of West Papua in Indonesia is the only clear such outcome – and even that cessation was only temporary.

Second, whereas several organisations have used their capacity for violence as a way to establish effective authority and, potentially, participate in crime, there have also been some that did not do so. This may indicate that the proposed link with the challenge of overcoming the collective action problem is less useful for the study of tactical choices. Considering that this theory is used without any modifications by scholars seeking to understand mobilisation both for protest and for war, that lack of leverage may not be so surprising.

Third, we see clear evidence to support the suggestion that actors carefully consider and decide on which tactic to choose. But we are left with the question of why we do not then see shifts in tactics more often. If tactical choices could be made with relative ease, it would make sense for contenders to change their approach whenever the outside context changes.

Fourth, the role of government repression seems to be the most influential external factor that pushes protesters to escalate from nonviolent to violent behaviour. This is particularly visible in the case of Myanmar, where the repression of nonviolent protests against the 2021 military coup directly influenced both individuals and movements as a whole either to take up arms or to forge collaborative links with violent actors. Looking back into the history of Myanmar, we can see that this episode is merely the latest iteration of a process in which the state's repression of urban nonviolent protests forces activists to seek refuge and join armed insurgencies in the countryside. Much the same happened immediately after independence in 1948, and after student-led protests against the military regime in 1962, 1975, and 1988.

In contrast to Myanmar, there has not been a similar radicalisation of protest movements in Thailand, Indonesia, or the Philippines in recent years, even though such a dynamic was visible in earlier waves of contention in those countries, as well. This suggests that it is not only the amount of repression that the state uses against civil society that matters, but also the type of measures that are deployed, and potentially also to what extent the protesters perceive that future nonviolent protests may be successful. An indicator of the last aspect is that even in regimes where the military is dominant – like in contemporary Thailand – other influential actors persist in mobilising, as well.

This chapter has provided an overview of how violent activism relates to civil society in Southeast Asia. Elements of this survey indicate that some aspects may warrant further investigation, not only in the region, but also in the field overall. Among those aspects is that it may be beneficial to start looking at the exact relationship between the state, or parts of the regime, and different efforts at mobilisation within civil society. Civil society organisations in both Indonesia and Myanmar that eventually became

violent were from the outset initiated or at least supported by the military in the country. Similarly, groups that were closely aligned with the regime at the time have also been more supportive of the use of violence in both Thailand and the Philippines. It is hardly surprising that scholarship on civil society and protest movements have, to some extent, avoided the study of state institutions, but looking at these linkages may be a fruitful line of inquiry in the future.

Another factor that features prominently in these cases and that has been previously understudied is the fact that it is relatively rare that the same organisation is involved in both nonviolent and violent activities, but it is common that there are bridges between organisations using such different tactics. While social movement scholars have explored the role of so-called radical flanks, these are often understood as constituting just a small share of the overall movement. Looking at the relationships between non-state armed groups and civil society in Myanmar and the Philippines, we note, tellingly, that even groups that are explicitly formed for the use of violence tend to create or allow the emergence of allies that are active in civil society space. In these cases, the groups in civil society often have fewer resources and less influence than the armed organisation, and they may be both collaborators and in opposition to the actions of the latter. Both civil society activists and conflict scholars should start considering the actions of such ‘moderate wings’ to understand wartime political orders.

There are several further aspects of the activities of civil society actors with links to violent non-state groups that this chapter has not addressed. What is evident, though, is that civil society and violent activism and mobilisation not only commonly co-exist but are also often more connected than what might initially be expected. As the literatures on civil society, social movements, and armed conflict around these issues are beginning to coalesce, we will hopefully soon have a greater understanding of these networks of actors and activities.

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