

**CIVIL SOCIETY IN ASIA:
THE ANTAGONISTIC RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN NGOS AND THE STATE**

A large yellow banner is suspended in front of a modern building with a grid-patterned facade. The banner features the text "DON'T LET US DROWN GREENPEACE" in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters. The banner is held up by ropes and pulleys. At the bottom of the banner, three people are visible: two in red jumpsuits and blue helmets, and one in a dark jacket and blue helmet, all appearing to be managing the banner's deployment or retrieval. The background shows the building's windows and the sky.

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CIVIL SOCIETY IN ASIA: THE ANTAGONISTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NGOS AND THE STATE

An article appeared recently in *The Ontario Herald* titled, “Greenpeace: A Threat to National Security.”¹ The article goes on to state that Greenpeace and other environmentalist groups are forcing “brutal change” in Asia.²

Focusing their attention on climate change, the fossil-fuel industry, sustainable agriculture, the rights of indigenous peoples, among other issues, these groups stand accused of promoting a state-of-the-art campaign of politics and fear in pursuance of their goals not only in Southeast Asia but in other Asian nations and South America as well. The debate is emotional and the battle lines are drawn. The ideological narrative has sidestepped rational discourses.

For example, the ClimateWorks Foundation heavily funded by legacy funds from American industrialists has since its inception, focused its efforts on answering the question, “What would it take to achieve a real ‘win’ in the battle against climate change?”³ Thus, a narrative is constructed using the language of warfare as a trope to mobilize activists for its cause. In Germany, for example, the use of the term, *Kämpfer* or *Kämpferin* signifies a combatant pursuing a struggle by arms or force rather than by peaceful means. The definition is not just merely linguistics but represents a *Zeitgeist* (or spirit of the age, or spirit of the time) to pursue a 1960s type of South American social struggle using violence as a leading *motif* in the discourse.

Likewise, Greenpeace and the Earth Liberation Front, as well as other radical environmentalist groups actively challenge governmental economic development projects through direct action in the case of the former,⁴ and through terrorist actions on the part of the latter.⁵ Setting aside, for the moment, the question of whether or not the activities of transnational nongovernmental organizations (TNGOs), such as environmental groups, in fact, pose a threat to the development and security of nation-states in Asia, what is the impact of TNGOs on the health and vigor of civil society in these countries?

TNGOs claim to be civil society organizations (CSOs) operating on a global scale; however, there is considerable debate concerning whether or not a *global civil society* exists.⁶ Globalization, and the process that it entails, may well be evolving into a truly globalized civil consciousness; if so, then the new civil consciousness will be anchored on the recognition of *modern* concerns. M.J. Akbar argues that there are four “non-negotiable fundamentals” of

¹ Shrödinger, Jürgen, *Greenpeace: A Threat to National Security*, Ontario Herald, 22 September 2014. <http://theontarioherald.com/greenpeace-a-threat-to-national-security/>. Viewed 11 November 2014.

² Ibid.

³ *Our History*, ClimateWorks Foundation, http://www.climateworks.org/about/our_history/. Viewed 22 November 2014.

⁴ Naidoo, Kumi, *Direct Action: When and Why?*, YouTube video, 1:38:49, streamed live on 24 February 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE_a2u29NNw. Viewed 24 November 2014.

⁵ Joosse, James Paul, *Leaderless Resistance, Radical Environmentalism, and Asymmetrical Warfare*, doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta, 2014, <https://era.library.ualberta.ca/public/view/item/uuid:fc2d5923-383e-4bfd-be7d-ecf73112c7fc/>. Viewed 24 November 2014.

⁶ *Interview with Helmut Aneheier About Global Civil Society*, YouTube video, 14:16, posted by FutureChallenges, 6 March 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzrb4vXSzHM>. Viewed 30 November, 2014.

modernity, “. . . democracy, freedom of faith (including the right to non-belief), gender equality, and economic equity through which the poor feel that they have a legitimate share of rising prosperity.”⁷ Hence, we would argue that for any TNGO to have a *legitimate role* in shaping debate in the sphere of civil society it should work within these “modern fundamentals” or parameters.

As applied to environmental TNGOs, two important and related democratic parameters are transparency and accountability. Exactly whose interests are being represented, as well as how they are being represented, is a cause of concern in the “Global South”⁸ (or developing) nations. The problem of donors/recipients has crystalized this concern in terms of geo-political perspectives.

For example, it has been argued that the activities of nongovernmental organization (NGOs) in the developing world generally have seldom supported indigenous civil societies; that their political legitimacy has been undermined due to weak roots, political restrictions, and over-professionalization; reducing their impact significantly.⁹

The environmental movement is one example of successfully establishing networks at all levels of civil society. However, the profile of these organizations that is emerging is one of elitist, wealthy, and powerful left-leaning (or *progressive*) foundations providing support for activist, undemocratic organizations that impose their values in a top-down fashion.¹⁰

Donors, such as the ClimateWorks Foundation,, are funded by foundations like the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (computers),¹¹ the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (tobacco and energy),¹² and the Joyce Foundation (lumber)¹³—all financed by successful capitalist enterprises associated with climate change. Besides donor and activist organizations there is a vast “eco service” or environmental services industry that profits from environmental protection, assessment, compliance with environmental regulations, pollution control, waste management, remediation of contaminated property, and the provision and delivery of environmental resources.¹⁴

Environmental services and environmental TNGOs are closely aligned on environmental concerns, with the services sector in it for the profit while the TNGOs are non-profit but dependent to some degree on support from capitalist foundations. Some TNGOs are transparent, others are not; some employ democratic procedures in their internal decision-making processes and others are strictly hierarchical. Nonetheless, NGOs can function in civil

⁷ Akbar, M.J., *The Next Last Great War: the Next Battle for Modernity*, Halifax International Security Forum, 2014 Essays, p. 2. <http://halifaxtheforum.org/2014-essays>. Viewed 22 November 2014.

⁸ *North-South Divide*, Wikipedia.org. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North%E2%80%93South_divide. Viewed 24 November 2014

⁹ Banks, Nicola, David Hulme and Michael Edwards, *NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?* World Development, 2015. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939>. Viewed 29 October 2014.

¹⁰ Committee on Environment and Public Works, *The Chain of Environmental Command: How a Club of Billionaires and Their Foundations Control the Environmental Movement and Obama's EPA*, United States Senate, 30 July 2014. http://www.epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore_id=8af3d005-1337-4bc3-bcd6-be947c523439. Viewed 12 November 2014.

¹¹ *William and Flora Hewlett and the Hewlett Foundation*, <http://www.hewlett.org/about-us/hewlett-family-history>. Viewed 24 November 2014.

¹² *About Us*, <http://www.ddcf.org/About-Us/>. Viewed 21 November 2014.

¹³ *Joyce Foundation*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joyce_Foundation. Viewed 21 November 2014.

¹⁴ *The Environmental Industry*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The_Environmental_Industry. Viewed 24 November 2014.

society in order to make governments more accountable and therefore the international system more democratic by fomenting a “deliberative” democracy where many voices may be heard.¹⁵ Transparent accountability remains a problem for these organizations.

The second modern parameter, “freedom of faith (including the right to non-belief),”¹⁶ would seem, on first glance, to not apply to environmental TNGOs who are normally considered to be secular organizations. On the other hand, a federal judge in the United States recently ruled that “secular humanism,” from the perspective of Constitutional Law could be considered a religion.¹⁷ Comparisons between environmentalist ideology and religion are not difficult to find; for example, James Lovelock, the originator of the “Gaia Hypothesis,” in a recent interview stated,

“Environmentalism has ‘become a religion’ and does not pay enough attention to facts.... [I]t’s just as silly to be a [climate] denier as it is to be a believer.... It [the impact from climate change] could be terrible within a few years, though that is very unlikely, or it could be hundreds of years before the climate becomes unbearable.”¹⁸

Increasingly, environmentalism is being labeled as a “political theology.”¹⁹ While religious freedom and freedom from religion are considered modern parameters, as noted above, the new “orthodoxy” adds to political debates the dangerous element of religious zealotry. Opponents are regularly demonized and public discourse suffers as a result besides retarding the function of civil society. We noted in an earlier DAFZ commentary²⁰ the emergence of a “transnational tribalism” that is based on identity politics that can create dangerous dichotomies in civil society, local or global.

The third parameter of modernity, gender equality, women represent over one-half of the world’s population, and their participation is another problem area for TNGOs generally and for environmentalist groups particularly. One writer laments this state of affairs,

“While the domination of social justice movements by old white men is nothing new, one place where it doesn’t get a lot of examination is within the environmental movement. While women in the movement express frustration with the state of affairs and work on programs intended to increase participation by women and promote the development of women leaders, women in other social justice movements seem slow to realize the importance of underrepresentation of women in conservation, environmental activism, and related movements. There’s a distinct dearth of young, energetic women leaders at the helm of mainstream environmental organizations, and

¹⁵ Interview with Helmut Aneheier About Global Civil Society, loc.cit.

¹⁶ Akbar, M.J., loc.cit.

¹⁷ Jenkins, Jack, *Atheists Score Major Win in Federal Court*, ThinkProgress, 4 November 2014, <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2014/11/03/3587801/district-court-declares-secular-humanism-a-religion/>. Viewed 25 November 2014.

¹⁸ Vaughan, Adam, *James Lovelock: Environmentalism has Become a Religion*, The Guardian, 30 March 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/mar/30/james-lovelock-environmentalism-religion>. Viewed 25 November 2014.

¹⁹ Among many such studies see Scott, Peter, *A Political Theology of Nature*, Vol. 9, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

²⁰ Duncan, William B. and Andreas Wimmer, *Nation-States or State-Nations? Tribalism in Perspective*, Vol. 23, Deutsches Asienforschungszentrum Asian Series Commentaries, 2014. <http://dafz.org/nation-states-or-state-nations-tribalism-in-perspective/>.

often, environmentalism seems to be represented very much as an old boys' club, a cautious land filled with nice old men."²¹

The inclusion of the participation of women in virtually all sectors of global civil society is a pressing concern; one that should be amenable through conscious decisions by TNGOs if they are avoid the pitfalls of traditional society in this regard.

The fourth and final parameter of modernity that we wish to address, "economic equity through which the poor feel that they have a legitimate share of rising prosperity,"²² lies at the crux of the problem of TNGO participation in national development: the problem of support. In other words, in the case of environmental groups in particular, how are they to make the issue appealing to and compelling for global civil society? James Murray expresses the problem well

"... [T]he recognition that the transition to a low carbon economy is both essential and desirable has become ever more widespread, as evidenced by everything from the latest US-China Climate Pact to the rapid expansion of the green bond market. But the environmental movement has struggled to match this progress in the realm of communications, repeatedly struggling to articulate a vision that can harness wider public and business support for economic decarbonisation and green behavior change."²³

Recognition that a transition to a low carbon economy is one thing, changing consumer behavior is quite another. A UK based consultant for the one of the Indonesian Pulp and Paper industry offers four reasons why environmental advocates have failed in this regard.²⁴ The first reason is, "The interest is not there"; unless an issue is immediate and tangible on a local level, consumers remain mostly indifferent. Secondly, "Consumers are not confined to industrialized nations"; in places such as Indonesia, Brazil and India consumers want the latest products and they want them fast. For populations in the "Global South" those are hungry for the material benefits enjoyed by populations in developed nations, the appeals of environmental TNGOs often fall on deaf ears.

Thirdly, "The jargon isn't working"; global shifts in consumer behavior are relatively rare, with the exception that demand continues to increase, due to communicative obfuscation and sometimes, outright deceit. Finally, "It hasn't worked in politics"; attracting support for environmental concerns in politics has been no more successful than it has been with consumers. The author concludes that environmental campaigns should not, "... [Waste] time and resources trying to mobilize a global public that may well follow, but will never lead the charge. ... [W]e can't afford to wait that long."²⁵

Alternatively, another consultant for the same group argues that the creation of a "New Environmentalism," that would appeal directly to the global public is necessary; he cites

²¹ Smith, S.E., *A Hostile Climate: Women and the Environmental Movement*, this ain't livin', Meloukia, 4 April 2013, http://meloukia.net/2013/04/a_hostile_climate_women_and_the_environmental_movement/. Viewed 25 November 2014.

²² Akbar, M.J., loc.cit.

²³ Murray, James, *The Pursuit of Green Freedom*, BusinessGreen, 19 November 2014. http://www.businessgreen.com/print_blog_article/bg/james-blog/2381935/the-pursuit-of-green-freedom?section=blog. Viewed 25 November 2014.

²⁴ May, Brendan, *Four Reasons why Green 'Consumer Behavior Change' is Descending Into a Wild Goose Chase*, Roberts Bridge Group, 28 May 2014, <http://www.robertsbridgegroup.com/our-views/goose-chase>. Viewed 23 November 2014.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

approvingly, “. . . [T]he conscious decision the Chicago School took to appropriate the language of freedom and liberty to build support for a neoliberal economic system that provided millions of people with neither.”²⁶ In the case of the environmentalist narrative, the focus should be on

“Freedom from polluted air, freedom from toxic water, freedom from climate risks, freedom from volatile fossil fuel prices, freedom from cities without enough green space, freedom from corporate and political power that has no interest in our long term future. What environmentalists are essentially demanding is freedom from pollution that delivers environmental justice to the victims of that pollution and the future generations that will face the climate impacts we are bequeathing them.”²⁷

Whether or not environmental TNGOs adopt a new narrative, as Murray suggests, or other tactics to motivate public support for their causes, the fact remains that they will be most effective if civil society is engaged at the local and national levels. It further raises the question of whether or not this narrative serves commercial interests or is intended to act as a mere marketing stratagem in the creation of a discourse that may fail to achieve the intended outcome since the narrative is not reflective of organic or democratic aspirations but is merely an artificially created narrative to support an unpopular political ideology. Governments like India, Malaysia, even Indonesia are taking increasingly notice.

If, in fact, *global civil society* is a reality, and based on modern parameters noted above, one could justifiably label some environmental TNGOs as “rogue” groups within a transnational civil society. This brings our commentary back to the issue of the antagonistic relationship between NGOs and nations in Southeast Asia.

From the perspective of nation-states in Southeast Asia, should TNGOs be legitimately included as part of their civil societies or something else? Many of these organizations have local subsidiaries but is that enough? At the end of the decade of the 1990s, in which NGOs were multiplying and establishing themselves around the globe, William F. Fisher summarized the dilemma,

“In the past decade, the conception of new world orders . . . has been encouraged by a perceived turbulence in world politics . . . , the volatility of culturally plural societies, the acceleration of globalization . . . , and the sense that nation-states are no longer obvious and legitimate sources of authority over civil society.... During this period, local, regional, and transnational collective action has attracted heightened attention from development practitioners, politicians, and social scientists.

“In the political space created by shifting interdependencies among political actors, by the globalization of capitalism and power, and by the decline of the state, growing numbers of groups loosely identified as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have undertaken an enormously varied range of activities, including implementing grass-roots or sustainable development, promoting human rights and social justice, protesting environmental degradation, and pursuing many other objectives formerly ignored or left to governmental agencies.”²⁸

²⁶ Murray, James, op.cit., p. 5

²⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁸ Fisher, William F. *DOING GOOD? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices*, 1997. faculty.bemidjistate.edu/mlawrence/Fisher.pdf. Viewed 13 November 2014.

The phenomenon (or dilemma) of the growing importance of NGOs vis-à-vis states has produced a love-hate relationship between the two.²⁹

On the one hand, NGOs provide much needed assistance in areas that states cannot or are not willing to commit resources; on the other hand, states must maintain their sovereignty and security interests. TNGOs like Greenpeace and other environmental groups routinely antagonize states by challenging their authority and in so doing have provoked various reactions. Indeed, Fisher notes that,

“While the moniker “nongovernment organization” suggests autonomy from government organizations, NGOs are often intimately connected with their home governments in relationships that are ambivalent and dynamic, sometimes cooperative, sometimes contentious, sometimes both simultaneously....”³⁰

It should come as no surprise that Asian countries (as well as others around the world) are striking back. The largest Asian countries—Russia, China, and India—have increased restrictions on NGOs with Russia going so far as to require these organizations to register as foreign agents.³¹ In China NGOs have been subjected to tax investigations and have faced restrictions for receiving donations from outside the country.³² The Intelligence Bureau in India recently released a report in which they accused Greenpeace of being a “threat to national economic security.”³³ Around the globe, governments are rethinking their relationships with NGOs.

In Southeast Asia, the same backlash is occurring with Greenpeace activists having been arrested in Sumatra, Indonesia, for blocking the export facilities of a pulp mill company;³⁴ and in Laos, NGOs must work under permanent state supervision.³⁵ Even in Thailand, with a ubiquitous NGO presence,

“The public perception of NGOs is a problem here. Many Thais have great misgivings about NGOs, seeing them as agents of foreigners aiming to undermine Thai society and the Thai way of life. Fingers are quick to point at NGOs that engage in social movements and social advocacy, though it is often difficult to categorize NGOs as either strictly advocacy organizations or service deliverers.”³⁶

²⁹ Nayar, Lola, *War and Green Peace*, Outlookindia.com, 30 January 2014, p. 3. <http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?291130>. Viewed 13 November 2014.

³⁰ Fisher, William F., op.cit., p. 451.

³¹ *Russian NGOs Could Get Stuck With ‘Foreign Agent’ Tag Permanently*, Reuters, 14 November 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russian-ngos-could-get-stuck-with-foreign-agent-tag-permanently/511164.html>. Viewed 18 November 2014.

³² Richburg, Keith B., *China’s Crackdown on Nonprofit Groups Prompts New Fears Among Activists*, The Washington Post, 11 May 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/05/10/AR2010051004801_pf.html. Viewed 17 November 2014.

³³ Siddhanta, Priyadarshi and Amitan Ranjan, *Indian Express*, 11 June 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/ib-report-to-pmo-greenpeace-is-a-threat-to-national-economic-security/>. Viewed 13 November 2014.

³⁴ *Indonesia Police Arrest Greenpeace Activists in Sumatra*, The Nation, 25 November 2009, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/home/Indonesian-police-arrest-Greenpeace-activists-in-S-30117357.html>. Viewed 17 November 2014.

³⁵ *Laos is not a Cozy Place for NGOs*, Deutsche Welle, 14 November 2014, <http://www.dw.de/laos-is-not-a-cozy-place-for-ngos/a-18063886>. Viewed 17 November 2014.

³⁶ Vichit-Vadakan, Juree, *Central Role in Development for Thai NGOs?*, Global Policy Forum, December 2001, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/177/31618.html>. Viewed 27 November 2014.

Growing suspicion of NGOs in Southeast Asian countries, as well as in many other nations, has called into question expectations in the 1990s that NGOs would become the “golden bullet” that would resolve the problems of development after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In conclusion, it appears that, in contradiction to the anticipated “decline of the nation-state,” that in fact nation states are re-asserting themselves vigorously.³⁷ As Mark Mazower observes,

“Yet these hopes [of globalization proponents] underestimated the sheer staying power – indeed the legitimacy – of the state and its institutions, and the extreme difficulty of creating new ones from scratch. NGOs remain on the sidelines: international organizations are vehicles for clusters and coalitions of national states to act in concert where they can. To that extent they are essentially derivative, reflecting the wishes of their most powerful members. The idea that they could be freed from the clutches of national governments was a pipe dream.”³⁸

As for a global or transnational civil society, it likewise remains an intellection—one that now can only be conceived of as global consumerism. As for the rogue environmental TNGOs, the consumers in the “Global South” may not be able to buy this, as the ideology is too close to comfort to the red-green narrative pursued by an ideologically anchored radical and extremely leftist center.

This triggers uncomfortable visions of a resurgence of communism in the region that is still fresh in the minds of many of the policy-makers. Within the context of ASEAN, constitutional declarations outlawing communism in countries like Indonesia and reactions by India, Bangladesh and China to the introduction of a “new religion” causing economic loss to the state are increasingly seen as part of a “black campaign”³⁹ against the interests of Southeast Asian states and that are contributing to the antagonistic relationship between the two ideologically opposed interests.

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³⁷ Mazower, Mark, *After the Crisis, the Nation State Strikes Back*, Financial Times, 26 November 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/61915746756e11e4a1a900144feabdc0.html#axzz3KFFNRkkf>. Viewed 27 November, 2014.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Havas Oegroseno: Minyak Sawit Indonesia "Diserang" dari Lima Penjuru*, 28 November 2014; <http://bisniskeuangan.kompas.com/read/2014/11/28/000413026/Havas.Oegroseno.Minyak.Sawit.Indonesia.Diserang.dari.Lima.Penjuru> Viewed 28 November 2014