

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs) IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND JAPAN: ORGANIZING FOR REGIONAL DEMOCRACY?

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1 INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the last decade has become a striking feature in the political landscape of Southeast Asia and, accompanying this development, the amount of related literature on NGOs has also remarkably increased. The primary premise of these studies is that the proliferation of NGOs strengthens civil society and promotes democracy, by fulfilling a role which traditional institutions such as labor unions and political parties are less able to do, and by representing interest articulation more widely than those traditional political actors. Also, NGOs are expected to play a role as an intermediary enabling the voices of those who have no access to the decision-making process of international institutions or multilateral corporations and may possibly become disadvantaged by globalization.

The basis of the arguments put forth for NGOs as an aid to the strengthening of civil society depends from which perspective these organizations are discussed. Due to its ability to act more flexibly than the bureaucracy, liberals expect NGOs to be able to provide an alternative to the rigid state sector and that they will strengthen the weak private sector, in effect becoming a third sector, particularly at present when the trend for deregulation has become strong. More progressive activists see NGOs as a vehicle of social movement to transform the social and political system. Despite these differences, both perspectives share the common premise that civil society can and should exist independently from the state. Moreover, they agree upon the fact that the proliferation of NGOs is a barometer gauging the maturity of civil society, *i.e.* the degree in which a society enables its citizens to freely express their opinions and to carry out social activities independent of the state, while at the same time exerting control to ensure that citizens fulfill their duties such as paying taxes.

This brief essay is not to examine fully the validity of the premised correlation between the proliferation of NGOs and the maturity of civil society in the cases of Asian countries, but to posit that there have emerged

NGOs which play and will continue to play a significant role in the democratization process in Southeast Asia. The emergence of NGOs is both a cause and an effect of social change in the last two decades, a period during which the economic and social situations underwent remarkable transformations and the trends toward peace, stability and prosperity seemed to be resilient and irreversible in the region. This prospect, however, turned to be too optimistic because the financial crises since mid-1997 have triggered economic downturns, social tensions and political uncertainty in the region.

The present economic crises have brought terrible pains and there has been no significant progress since the outset of these problems in the performance of their national economies in the region. Notwithstanding, it is clear, at least, that these crises must become an opportunity to change the financial and political systems to which these nations have been accustomed in the past and to promote transparency, to eliminate corruption, collusion and nepotism, and to enhance the quality of political participation. In other words, the East and Southeast Asian nations which have suffered the present economic crises have come to a turning point at which it is necessary to incorporate more of the plural aspirations of their societies into the national agenda and to create communities based on a shared sense of regional identity and values of caring societies.¹

For this purpose, the proliferation of NGOs in the region is encouraging and important, because it can contribute to the articulation of the interests of the previously muted people and to spread pluralism in the societies, even if it does not immediately mean a growing maturity of civil society that can exist separately from the state. Based on this perception, the prospects of NGOs in Southeast Asia and Japan's possible role and problems will be briefly discussed below.

2 DIMENSIONS OF NGO ACTIVITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the last two decades, NGOs working in various fields of society, such as rural development, the environment, legal assistance, and gender, have emerged in Southeast Asia. Among them, Philippine NGOs are by far better developed organizationally compared with those in other ASEAN countries. NGOs have not only increased in number but also developed in

¹ This thought was also stated in the section 'A Community of Caring Societies' in the 'ASEAN Vision 2020', which was adopted at the second informal summit meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Kuala Lumpur on 15 December 1997.

terms of the intensity and geographic scope of their activities over the last decade. Internet communication has greatly facilitated their exchange of information in the 1990s.

The NGO activities in the ASEAN countries may be found in a diversified array of programs. The most common programs are related to poverty and development such as primary education, primary health care in rural areas, child labor, slum dwellers in cities, and environmental degradation, to mention a few. There are many NGOs which are engaged in advocacy activities related to development policies which may cause, or have caused, land disputes or environmental deterioration. Also there are NGOs which are struggling to improve the civil and political rights of the people of countries where these NGOs are based. Though these activities are seemingly different from one another in their issue-based dimensions, the targets of legal assistance groups, development NGOs and environmental NGOs often converge, and they sometimes call for joint action when they are faced with problems related to the abuse or inefficiency of administrative power over the local people.

The leaders of these NGOs² mostly belong to the educated middle class, which has emerged along with the continuing economic growth in the last two decades. It can be said, therefore, that economic growth, both from the positive and negative aspects, encouraged the proliferation of NGOs. These people, however, often hold the view that economic development is not sufficient in itself as this change must be paralleled by the reform of the political and legal system. Otherwise, they say, economic growth without accompanying social justice would produce social instability by deepening economic gaps and social grievances (Lubis 1993, 40–4).

This means that a new group of people has emerged, who have a keen interest in the public interest at large and are capable to show their vision to the society independently from the governments in Southeast Asian countries. Visions pursued by these NGOs are, for example, that of a society that protects individual civil rights, including children's human rights, that opposes the degradation of the natural environment, or that enlarges possibilities for political participation of the local people. This is an essentially new phenomenon in the sense that the rise of 'citizenry' independent of state power did not accompany the political process of nation-building, unlike the cases in the European states, because the nations in Southeast Asia, except for Thailand, had to start state-building after the

² The term 'leaders' as it is used here refers to either the founders of NGOs or, in the case of relatively large NGOs, to elected full-time representatives of these organizations.

end of World War II by fighting against the external powers, especially the former colonial powers, and then by pursuing economic development primarily under the initiatives of governments and state sectors.

Among NGOs fighting for civil rights, it is human rights NGOs that are directly faced with the dilemma between their struggle for public aspiration, *i.e.* basic rights like the freedom of expression and association, the right of property (of indigenous peoples), and the states which often fail to pay attention to it, or even suppress it. Furthermore, human rights NGOs also find themselves under the authoritarian systems in the region where they operate. For these reasons, the impact and spread of activities of human rights NGOs in Southeast Asia are worthy to be mentioned in the context of this paper.

3 HUMAN RIGHTS NGOs IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Human rights NGOs in a narrow sense are those which supply legal assistance to protect the legal rights of victims, who are often legally-illiterate and vulnerable to decisions of the state or corporations, for example in the case of the seizure of their land or forests for development projects. In this narrow sense, human rights NGOs are generally lawyer-based groups, and most of them in the ASEAN countries started their activities in the early 1970s.

In Indonesia, the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation³ evolved into a remarkably active nationwide human rights NGO under the leadership of the founder, Dr. Adnan Buyung Nasution, a prominent advocate of human rights. Though this was not the first lawyer-based human rights NGO in Indonesia, LBH has been outstanding in its wide range of activities involving legal aid and political activities to protect human rights since the early period of the New Order regime. From the outset, LBH had a basic plan in both the legal and political dimensions. The legal dimension is to defend the people of the low income bracket free of charge and on an individual basis. The political dimension is to develop a conceptual framework of democratic values, human rights, and rule of law for taking the initiative to improve the legal system. This latter dimension is based on the concept of 'structural legal aid' (Nasution 1996, 23), which focuses on initiatives to improve legal systems instead of taking such systems for

³ The Indonesian name of this organization is Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia (YLBHI). It was originally set up as LBH in 1970 and started its operation in 1971. YLBHI became its formal name in 1981, but hereafter it is abbreviated as LBH.

granted and restricting oneself to just giving legal advice. Under the Soeharto regime in Indonesia, social organizations were under tight control by the government, the society as a whole was sweepingly de-politicized and the basic rights of social groups such as workers, students, youth, and women were strictly limited. LBH, which was supported in its initial stages by the Governor of Jakarta, succeeded in sustaining a considerably independent stance and struggled against the excessive abuse of human rights under the Soeharto government. By representing the voices of the public through legal measures, LBH fulfilled an important role in the Indonesian political system. Since the 1970s, LBH has been committed to defend the human rights of defendants in political trials and has actively supported the establishment of other leading NGOs such as Walhi, the biggest environment NGO in Indonesia, INFID (International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development)⁴, and the Independent Committee for Elections Watch (KIPP) in March 1996. Though some leaders left LBH because of an internal conflict over the new leadership in 1996, they also set up new human rights NGOs and are actively involved in the protection of the human rights of student activists and political prisoners in Indonesia.

It is not LBH alone that has struggled for the empowerment of the common people, *i.e.* the establishment of their civil rights, since the 1970s. By providing a channel for the people to express dissatisfaction with the political system, by stimulating the development of alternative political options and visions, and by establishing an international network of activities, these new NGOs – and their leaders in particular – became a trigger of the recent political dynamism in Indonesia, which led to the fall of former President Soeharto. Social dynamism has emerged in the early 1990s in Indonesia, at first in the form of workers' movements to form independent labor unions, then in the form of pro-democracy organizations along with the revitalization of intellectuals. These new movements were sometimes suppressed ruthlessly but eventually created an environment that led to the outburst of students' revolt in 1998 under the serious economic downturns and the incapability of the government to improve the economic situation.

There are two other factors contributing to the present political dynamism in Indonesia; first, the drastic increase – about tenfold – in the

⁴ It started in 1985, and was known as the International NGO Forum on Indonesia (INGI) from 1988 until 1994. Shortly after its 8th annual meeting in March 1992, the Indonesian government announced its intention to dissolve the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI) which had been chaired by the Dutch government. As a consequence, INGI lost its main target of advocacy activity, and in 1994 INGI changed its name to INFID.

number of university students including technical schools in the last three decades; and secondly the open minded attitude of some leading political elite like General Wiranto or Lieutenant General S. Bambang Yudhoyono toward a dialogue with the people. Now for the first time since the years of struggle for independence from 1945–1949, with the revitalization of political activities, workers and students have again become dynamic actors. This dynamism is a remarkable social change. In the 1960s and 1970s, only a handful of intellectuals were active advocates in protecting human rights and democracy. They might have raised public awareness about civil rights, but they were too small in number and their abstract political ideas were too detached from the general public to trigger social change at that time.

Compared with the Indonesian cases, the Philippines has been much more experienced in organizing societies or communities, not only in regard to human rights issues but also various welfare activities. Welfare organizations were already set up in the American colonial period, and shortly after its independence, some nationwide pioneer NGOs, such as the Institute of Social Order (ISO), founded in 1947, and the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM)⁵ in 1952. These NGOs were set up to encourage ‘community development’ incorporating the promotion of primary health and education, and various socio-economic development activities, which were meant to offer a strategic alternative to the perceived imminent spread of communism in rural areas. As a result, they were supported directly or indirectly by businesses, the Catholic Church, and the United States-backed governments.

After the imposition of martial law in 1972, the systematic violation of human rights, such as arbitrary arrests, abduction and the murder of members of opposition groups, became widespread. Human rights NGOs actively supported the estimated 10,000 political detainees, such as the Catholic Church-based Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), the Free Legal Assistance Group (FLAG), and the Movement of Attorneys for Brotherhood, Integrity, and Nationalism Inc. (MABINI). These NGOs raised the issue of human rights as their central cause around which the fragmented opposition groups could unite and mobilize political advocacy against the Marcos regime.

⁵ PRRM, at the time when this writer visited its head office in August 1996, had branches in 17 provinces with about 400 staff. It is one of the most well-organized and influential NGOs in the country, which has recovered from a decade-long moribund situation under a new leader, Horacio Morales, who had been detained as a political prisoner and released in March 1986. For a summarized history of PRRM, see Clarke (1998, 138–64).

After the EDSA revolt in February 1986, the wave of democratization brought about an enormous increase in the number of NGOs. Curiously, at the same time, some big human rights NGOs with long records in social activities, such as the TFDP, began to be fragmented by internal rifts over their strategy and had to redefine their role as human rights NGOs. Because the issue of human rights was a major plank of the Aquino administration, they had to engage themselves with, or even shore up, the government which was rapidly weakened after the short euphoria in the post-election period had waned.

In other words, when the state power was ruthlessly authoritarian, the activities of human rights NGOs were aimed at protesting the abuse of power and protecting human rights, but once the state became sympathetic to these issues, their activities changed to focus on the enhancement of human rights by means of electoral participation and participation in local governments. Also, recently there can be found a new change in the Philippine NGOs. They previously had few links with NGOs in the other ASEAN countries, but have begun to join in the regional movements and network in the 1990s. Also, as for the elections in June 1999 in Indonesia, the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) cooperated with Jaringan Masyarakat Pemantau Pemilu Indonesia (JAMPI), one of the independent organizations in Indonesia, in monitoring the general elections. This in itself was a significant opportunity to gain experience for NGOs in the both countries.

In Thailand, traditionally there have been philanthropic activities by non-state actors, but it was in the 1970s that human rights NGOs became active, and intellectuals and students were the principal actors. The Union for Civil Liberty (UCL), set up in the mid-1970s during the 'democratic period' by the activist lawyer Somchai Homlaor, played a key role in setting up the Coordinating Committee of Human Rights Organizations of Thailand (CCHROT) in 1983. The main activities of this organization are monitoring human rights violations, public education through its radio program and publications, and lobbying for an independent human rights committee at home as well as for a regional human rights mechanism in Southeast Asia that promotes the exchange of information and supports lobbying activities at international organizations.

In Malaysia, proactive human rights NGOs started their activities mostly in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Suaram (Suara Rakyat Malaysia) is a Kuala Lumpur-based human rights NGO which was formed to protect the detainees arrested in the 'Lalang Operation' of 1987. Also, since the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Anwar Ibrahim, was sacked and later arrested in September 1998, new social movements calling for justice have occurred. NGOs such as Aliran, set up in 1977 in

Penang, Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), and Just World Trust (JUST)⁶ are actively involved in this campaign for political justice.

The campaign for Anwar Ibrahim is interesting in the sense that it takes a partisan character, but it is not the first such case under the Mahathir administration. So far most of the human rights NGOs in Malaysia were organizations made up of non-Malay people. Malay people, generally speaking, show little interest in participating in human rights activities, because for them to claim 'human rights' was almost equal to challenge their legally protected privileges. In other words, 'for many middle-class Malays, indigenous rights and ethnic privileges are more important than human rights' (Muzaffar 1990, 124). The Anwar case, however, seems to have changed this traditional character of human rights activities in Malaysia.

Besides these lawyer-based human rights NGOs which emerged out of pressing domestic necessities, there are many other pro-active NGOs in Southeast Asia that work regionally for human rights issues. For instance, the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD), set up in Bangkok in 1975, has had from the outset a regional network in the Asia-Pacific region, and since 1983 it has drafted and implemented action programs for workers⁷, peasants, fishermen, and women. Each corresponding forum has four sub-regional groups: South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific region. Since 1992, joint action programs of all four forums started focusing on human rights, the environment and the empowerment of the people. Also in 1992, the Asian Regional Resource Center for Human Rights Education (ARRC) was set up in the office of ACFOD. It was ACFOD and other human rights NGOs in Asia which in 1992 created the 'People's Plan for the 21st Century (PP21)'. It presented the platform for pursuing a people-oriented development vision by building the international cooperation of the NGOs in Asia.

Forum Asia (Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development), set up in Bangkok in 1991, consists of about 20 human rights NGOs in Southeast and South Asia.⁸ It has been involved in fact-finding research and advocacy campaigns for the democratization of Indonesia, Myanmar and

⁶ CAP was established in 1970 and helped to establish Friend of Earth Malaysia (SAM) in 1976, and Third World Network in 1984 in Penang. JUST, which was set up in 1992, moved to Petaling Jaya close to Kuala Lumpur in February 1997.

⁷ The Workers' Forum now belongs to the Asia Pacific Workers' Solidarity Links (APWSL) in New Zealand. Personal interview with Mr. Boonthan T. Verawongse, Peace and Human Rights Program of ACFOD on 1 August 1997.

⁸ Representatives of YLBHI, Suaram, Philippines Alliance of Human Rights Advocates and three other NGOs in Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan are members of the Executive Committee of Forum Asia in 1997.

Cambodia. Altsean Burma (Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma) was one of the products of a workshop in 1996, coordinated by Forum Asia and two other Thai-based NGOs.⁹ They have been actively lobbying with regards to Myanmar's problems at ASEAN meetings.

Thai human rights NGOs such as ACFOD, CCHROT and Forum Asia played a key role as coordinators of the 'Asia Pacific NGO Conference on Human Rights' in Bangkok in March 1993, prior to the 'UN World Conference on Human Rights' held in June 1993. In many joint statements of extensive agendas, they have proposed the establishment of a regional human rights mechanism as well as adequate national human rights institutions.¹⁰ They also urged Asian states to repeal internal security laws that conflict with international human rights norms.

The 'Asia Pacific NGO Conference on Human Rights' became a turning point for two reasons. First, the idea of a regional mechanism to protect human rights, which used to be proposed by eminent persons' groups since the 1960s, changed into the program of more action-oriented NGOs trying to catalyze the empowerment in the Asian societies. Second, after this Conference, the regional networking of the participant NGOs began to be institutionalized, and in the first follow-up meeting held in New Delhi in late 1996, the NGOs decided to meet every three years (ACFOD 1997). Such growing NGO cooperation, which can also be seen in the cases of the Altsean Burma based in Bangkok or the APCET (Asia Pacific Conference on East Timor), suggests that the 'Asia Pacific NGO Conference' in Bangkok engendered a regional network for norm-setting activities within the ASEAN societies and this solidarity seems to have given NGOs a sense of confidence in their purpose and action.

While it is too early to evaluate the effect of this regional networking, at least an official response has emerged from the governments. Interestingly, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting responded to this trend in its 1993 Joint Communique by stating that 'ASEAN should also consider the establishment of an appropriate regional mechanism on human rights' (ASEAN Secretariat 1994, 8). Also in recent years, the human rights NGOs in the ASEAN countries have set forth action plans collectively entitled 'the Initiative for the Establishment of an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism', and they have now adopted the practice of establishing regular di-

⁹ They were the Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma and the Burma Solidarity Group in Malaysia. Personal interview with Ms. Debbie Stothard, Coordinator of Altsean Burma on 31 July 1997.

¹⁰ Joint Statement by NGOs on Regional Human Rights Instruments and Mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific Region and National Institutions (*Our Voice* 1993, 189-92).

alogues with senior officials prior to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting.¹¹ This contact between human rights NGOs and the governments is very new, and it is significant that the emerging regional network in the ASEAN countries is now going to work regionally for the universal human rights agenda.

4 JAPAN'S APPROACHES TO HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

This new situation, however, has not yet attracted considerable attention in Japan, except for only a handful of human rights NGOs. Three background factors are to be considered.

First, Japanese NGOs are relatively new and historically less experienced in international joint activities than Western NGOs. Also it is a relatively new phenomenon, especially in the 1990s, that the mass media as well as the public pay attention to NGOs and volunteer activities for certain pressing needs in domestic situations. According to the statistics provided by the Japanese NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC), about 48% of Japanese NGOs were set up in the 1990s, 40% in the 1980s, and less than ten NGOs were established in the 1970s, which deserve to be regarded as pioneers (JANIC 1996, 2–3). This partly resulted from the social atmosphere in which ‘non-governmental’ activities were easily regarded as ‘anti-governmental’ during the decades of Liberal Democratic Party single party dominance. Until the early 1970s, there were no civic movements in Japan that were not based on political parties, except for a few cases like women’s organizations and the intellectuals’ peace movement.

Second, the primary motivation of Japanese NGOs is humanitarian. Of the 185 Japanese NGOs involved in overseas activities, 68 NGOs are motivated by a wish to help people in emergencies such as refugees from starvation or natural disasters (JANIC 1996, 5–7). The work of most Japanese NGOs focuses on humanitarian activities. The second most common activity is to supply material such as medical equipment or supplies for schools. Out of these initial motivations, some Japanese NGOs have expanded their operations into direct development assistance such as digging wells, building schools, and planting trees (Kitazawa 1994, 14–15). While these activities can be said to be motivated by human rights prob-

¹¹ Its first contact with the Senior Officials meeting was established in 1996. It also seeks to have regular dialogues with the Senior Officials meeting. A copy of the documents of the workshop which adopted the action plans in June 1997 was given to this writer by courtesy of Forum Asia in Bangkok in July 1997.

lems, considering that poverty hinders the fulfillment of human rights, such operations are reactive in nature and only can help to treat the symptoms of a problem, but not the causes. This characteristic curiously coincides with that of Japan's ODA policies, which has predominantly focused on material development assistance, based on the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, and has taken the legal and political system of the recipient countries for granted.

In the last decade, changes in the ODA budget have encouraged new methods to help the activities of NGOs. These are, for example, subsidies to NGO programs and grants to grassroots organizations in recipient countries.¹² The Ministry of Foreign Affairs established an office to support private foreign assistance activities in 1994, and has instituted regular meetings with representatives of Japanese NGOs since 1996. However, applications have to meet stringent conditions to be eligible to obtain such subsidies, and accordingly only projects requiring large amounts of money such as the construction of schools, medical facilities, or water supply facilities tend to be accepted.

While these new methods may be based on the new perception of the potential role of NGOs to empower the local societies in recipient countries, they appear to be intended to complement the weakness of Japanese ODA policy that makes the recipient NGOs supplementary components of Japan's foreign policy. These methods could thus result in reinforcing the status quo of the aid delivery system. What is needed more than this is to properly focus on, and to have a creative vision to improve, the problems of the present aid delivery system, instead of taking it for granted. To this end, it would be important for Japan's ODA and NGOs to have extensive networks, both directly and indirectly, with the local NGOs. In other words, Japan's ODA policy needs to enhance a more sociological approach both on the domestic and international level: ODA policies that consider and respond more directly to the local needs of the Asian societies, and which provide local people with increased opportunities for participation.

As for Japan's ODA policies in the domestic context, since the Law to Facilitate Activities of Nonprofit Organizations was enacted in March

¹² Subsidies to NGO Programs are financed exclusively to Japanese NGOs operating in developing countries. It started with a budget of 82 million yen in FY 1989, and has increased to 816 million yen by FY 1996. Grants to grassroots organizations financed directly to local NGOs in the recipient countries started by 300 million yen in FY 1989 and has increased by more than 10 times to 5 billion yen in FY 1997. About 55% of both operations participated in activities in the Asian countries (MOFA 1997, 189, 210).

1998, the legal status of NGOs has improved, and the number of NGOs is likely to increase. What really matters is, however, not their number, but the functions that they play. If their major function is to help meet the shortcomings of public policy by providing social service, their relations with administrative agencies would be mostly complementary. This is necessary but perhaps not sufficient for the 'sociological approach' advocated by this writer. The idea is suggested here to create a new policy to financially support activities of human rights NGOs, not by the government directly but by a neutral institution set up by the government, for instance, to facilitate human rights research projects and activities internationally as well as locally. As for its ODA policies to Asian countries, a sociological approach has been employed for the last decade in particular, by focusing on material assistance to the socially disadvantaged or on the training of people. While this approach is on the right track to the empowerment of local societies, the problem seems to be its channel through the central governmental agencies of the recipient countries.

The dramatic rise in the number of NGOs in the Philippines, where the new Local Government Code enacted in 1991 has facilitated, though not always successful, civic participation in local governance,¹³ or the increase in NGO activities in Indonesia, where the new Laws on Intergovernmental Fiscal Relations and on Local Autonomy were approved in April 1999, may promote decentralization and change problematic aspects of local politics such as the interplay of patronage, clan and customary law. The important function of NGOs would become community building in rural areas and network building between rural and metropolitan NGOs. For the regional level, such a development was depicted in the 'ASEAN Vision 2020', adopted at the December 1997 ASEAN Informal Summit Meeting. It envisioned 'a community of caring societies', formed by 'nations being governed with the consent and greater participation of the people' (ASEAN Secretariat 1998, 76-7). In this context as well, Japan's approach needs to help, either indirectly through NGOs or local governmental agencies, local NGOs' activities to empower community building and local governance.

Third, the Japanese public as well as the media had been generally unaware of, or not interested in, the political systems and human rights issues caused by the state powers in Asia until the late 1980s and early 1990s. The causal factors for this considerable lack of interest in human rights issues abroad are not directly relevant to the context of this paper, but it has to be noted that the public atmosphere has obviously changed in the last decade. Much more public attention is still needed, however.

¹³ Four interesting case studies can be found in Silliman and Noble (1998).

Because of the above three factors combined, there has been little discussion on human rights issues between Japan and other Asian societies at the non-profit private sector level. Only recently, however, new developments have emerged. One example is the joint meeting of the Japan Civil Liberty's Union (JCLU) and other human rights NGOs in Asia-Pacific in Jakarta in February 1999. The various NGOs participating in this meeting agreed on regularly holding such meetings and on cooperating to strengthen human rights NGOs in the region. This kind of sociological approach is noteworthy, because it has been missing in Japan's relations with Asia, both on the official and private level.

5 CONCLUSION

As this brief survey shows, NGOs have emerged in Southeast Asia that are engaged in advocacy activities to empower the weak civil societies from within, sometimes in collaboration with international NGOs. They directly confront patronage-based political systems, and have also created an increasingly large regional network in the last decade, though it is still too limited to represent the voices of the muted at the grassroots and regional levels.

The political implication of these emerging NGOs in Southeast Asia is that, firstly, they are changing the nature of political opposition in Southeast Asian countries to a less militant, more issue-based, and more ideologically flexible one. These NGOs are essentially different from traditional political opposition groups in the sense that most of them do not intend to hold political power by themselves. This may imply that traditional political opposition structures in Southeast Asia that were aimed at taking over political power have declined over the last two decades, being replaced by and changed into issue-based NGOs.

Secondly, along with the end of the Cold War, old political movements with revolutionary paradigms have waned. However, this change had already started in Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s, and for political opposition groups demilitarization and negotiation have become a primary means for conflict resolution. This results from the change of stance and attitudes of both governments and NGOs under the continuing economic growth in the last two decades.

Thirdly, however, the nature and scope of NGO activities, particularly the activities of human rights NGOs, are relative to the function of political parties. When political parties are weak to articulate explicit platforms on the core values of the people, such as human rights, NGOs are forced to struggle for these core values in coordination with other NGOs. Thus,

their activities often have partisan nature by expanding membership and in some cases by cooperation with Western NGOs. But, when the human rights situation is improved by the change of government policies, the partisan character of human rights NGOs' activities also tends to change into divergence and fragmentation because of internal debates over leadership and strategy.

From the short-term perspective, this implies the possibility of plural articulation of human rights issues by various human rights NGOs. From the long-term perspective, however, if political parties become more representative and effective, and if they develop independent policy making capacities, the nature of human rights NGOs may also change. There might arise a possibility that either it becomes their primary goal to enhance political participation under a given political party system, or that NGOs themselves choose to become an independent political actor.

Certainly these NGOs have their own problems such as internal conflicts, splits over leadership, or management that often lacks efficiency and transparency. Also the number and capacity of NGOs is still too small to be an effective catalyst for the transformation of societies which are imbued with the distrust of public institutions as well as accustomed to state intervention.

Even impeded by all these problems, however, NGOs can play a significant role in Southeast Asia, or Asia-Pacific in general. This is due to their belief that international civil society in the region must emerge in the years to come, in order to give a regional voice to local people and hopefully to counterbalance states and business sectors where the predominantly principal actors in Asia-Pacific are located. Moreover, governments and international organizations are increasingly aware that NGOs can play an important role in planning and implementing development programs. If these new trends in Southeast Asia are taken into consideration, a creative sociological approach that is beyond the donor-recipients relation is much more necessary than ever in Japan's official policy. Also more active networking based on conceptual, not merely operational, activities on the NGO level between Japan and other Asian societies needs to be created.

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