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BETWEEN ASEAN DEMOS AND ASEAN KRATOS: THE GENESIS OF ASEAN PUBLIC SPHERES

This study centers on the following question: do the political, civil society organizations, and media infrastructure conditions exist for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres? The following definition of ASEAN public sphere have been constructed: a transnational site of deliberation in which civil society organizations reach an understanding about issues of common concern in ASEAN according to the norms of publicity. Patterns from three distinct structures that converged to form ASEAN public spheres has been identified. Firstly, the prime site of ASEAN's governance consisting of the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Community Councils, and ASEAN Secretariat has, to a certain extent, become open to the people's input. Secondly, the emergence of transnational civil society and discursive publics in ASEAN. As a reservoir for the grassroot opinion- and will-formation, the civil society in ASEAN has been indispensable in terms of its norms of publicity and political efficacy. Thirdly, the cross borders communicative infrastructure has proven to be significant in terms of the grassroot formation fora as well as the mobilization of free and critical public opinion towards ASEAN across the region. They also challenge the "manipulative" and "manufactured consent" that tends to be propagated by the mainstream pro-political authority and pro-market media. Despite the prevailing supremacy of ASEAN's political elites, as well as the interstate ICT cleavages in the region, I argue that a conducive milieu has developed in which ASEAN public spheres can indeed emerge.

Introduction

Approximately 40 years since its inception, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had finally ratified its very first ASEAN Charter in 2007. It is intended to serve as a "legal and institutional framework" for ASEAN. This historical progress lays a foundational shift from an intergovernmental paradigm towards a more "people-centered" ASEAN. In parallel with the critical science embodied within Jurgen Habermas' works, this research shall engage the contemporary development in ASEAN from his perspective of the "public sphere" theory. As consistently emphasized by Habermas, the public sphere is a pivotal precept for the democratization process (Habermas 1991, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2012).

Despite the grandiose receptions received by the public sphere theory (e.g., Calhoun et al 1992), the advent of the twenty-first century globalization has increasingly subjected the three conventional structures that inform the theory to some massive challenges: national media, nation state's political authority, and national citizenship. Accordingly, this investigation employed Angela Crack's modified conceptions of Habermas' original public sphere theory – a "transnational public spheres" theory. Crack defines the transnational public sphere as a "site of deliberation in which non-state actors reach understandings about issues of common concern".

By reconstructing Habermas' and Crack's conceptions of public sphere, I propose the following definition of "ASEAN public sphere": a transnational site of deliberation in which civil society organizations reach an understanding about issues of common concern in ASEAN according to the norms of publicity. Thus, a primary research question that guides this endeavor is "do the political, civil society organizations, and media infrastructure conditions exist for the emergence of the ASEAN public spheres?"

The main research question has been divided into three sub-research questions: (1) Do the political conditions exist for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres?; (2) Do the civil society organization conditions exist for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres?; (3) Do the media infrastructure conditions exist for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres?

The research objectives are as follows. Firstly, the study analyzes the political conditions for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres. Secondly, it investigates the civil society organization conditions for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres. Thirdly, it evaluates the media infrastructure conditions for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres.

ASEAN Background

ASEAN was established amidst the Cold War in 1967. After the failures of two previous attempts to forge Southeast Asian regional inter-state cooperation

– Maphilindo and Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) – ASEAN has surprisingly survived until today. With a pursuit for regional peace and stability remained as ASEAN's cornerstone, the organization has evolved into a much over-arching entity in parallel with the enlargement process. Along with the expansion of ASEAN, this regional platform has also become an irresistible fulcrum due to the rise of various pressing transnational concerns. Indeed, globalization obviously did not play little role in ASEAN's unprecedented regionalism progress. The end of the Cold War for instance, did not only affect the increased number of ASEAN members via the accession of Socialist and authoritarian regimes alone. The increased connectivity among ASEAN member states has also proved to be one of the most significant implications due to the advent of globalization. Eventually, during the 9th ASEAN Summit in 2003, ASEAN leaders had unanimously adopted a highly ambitious dream – to move together towards the establishment of a single ASEAN Community in 2015.

However, the degree of citizens' engagement in the aforementioned ASEAN Community project is quite questionable. This trend has been echoed by one of ASEAN studies scholar:

> "regionalism in Southeast Asia is commonly understood as those processes of inter-state interactions, dialogue and cooperation that take place under the purview of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)….however, with the ASEAN cooperation on regional governance controlled and driven by the region's political and bureaucratic elite with little room for civil society inputs or participation in regional governance processes" (Nesadurai 2012, p.1).

Indeed, under the period of rapid market economy-oriented regionalization progress in the Southeast Asia around the 1980s, the relationships between ASEAN with corporate entities had become more solidified than ever4. With the ASEAN's further aim toward the establishment of a single regional economic market, the neoliberal market paradigm has attained its ultimate position in the region's agenda. To make it worse, the rise of the neoliberal turn in ASEAN's regionalization occurred at the expense of the public opinion (Moorthy & Benny 2012; 2013; Igarashi 2011, p.9).

As a result, it is debatable whether the peoples of ASEAN – or called the "ASEAN's demos" – are possessing any hopeful potential at all pertaining to their opinion to efficaciously influence the governance affairs at the ASEAN level. Hence, this inquiry sets to contribute into the theoretical debates that revolved around the interconnections of three particular structures: ASEAN political authority, its citizens or demos, as well as the communication media that dwell across Southeast Asia. This quest is deemed relevant since the

interrelationship between those structures possesses an intrinsic significance for the democratization in the ASEAN governance which has yet to be uncovered.

ASEAN Public Spheres Structures

This inquiry focused on the three outlined structures in the search for the prospects of the emergence of the ASEAN public spheres. Built upon Habermas' and Crack's conceptualization, I propose the following definition of ASEAN public sphere: "a transnational site of deliberation in which civil society organizations reach an understanding about issues of common concern in ASEAN according to the norms of publicity". The ASEAN public spheres structures that shall be scrutinized respectively are: ASEAN political authority; the transnational civil society organizations involved in the formation of publics opinion on ASEAN affairs; and the media infrastructure that resides across the region. Now I turn to explain the details of each ASEAN public spheres structure.

First of all, ASEAN's political structure shall be examined based on its increasingly "bureaucratic-like" institutions: the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Community Councils, as well as the ASEAN Secretariat – under the aegis of the ASEAN Charter. In the same way as Habermas had centered the rise of the bourgeois constitutional states in the eighteenth century Europe via the Britain's reform bill of 1834, as well as the French Revolution in France and July Revolution in Germany, this inquiry shall also delve into the "constitutionalization" of ASEAN. Hence, ASEAN's progress – from the 1967 Bangkok Declaration towards the 2007 unanimously ratified ASEAN Charter – shall be appraised under the light of the three mentioned political institutions in ASEAN. These political authorities are subsequently recognized as ASEAN "triple power helix". Among these "triple power helix" institutions, the ASEAN Summit in particular was considered as the most powerful entity in Southeast Asia by virtues of acquiring immense share in shaping the journey toward the realization of the ASEAN Community project. It is, after all, consisted of the ten relatively most powerful persons in Southeast Asia, namely the countries' leaders. Thus, the degree of accountability and the receptions among these three ASEAN''s political institutions helix towards the ASEAN demos' public opinion will be studied accordingly.

Secondly, the transnational civil society organizations' structures that dwell in Southeast Asia will be analyzed to determine to what extent their represented cross-border deliberations are adhered to deliberative norms. Those deliberative norms which have been elaborated by Crack (2008) are as follows:

"First, that debate should be free and open to all affected actors as nominal equals, regardless of their social status. Second, debate should be conducted according to certain principles. For example, participants should endeavor to make their contributions intelligible to others; and when interrogated, be willing to provide reasoned justification for their opinions. Third, arguments should be oriented toward understanding and adjudicating through rational judgment" (Crack 2008, p.19).

ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) and the Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA) shall be treated as two primary network institutions consisting of the transnational civil society in the Southeast Asia. The ASEAN People's Assembly (APA) and ASEAN Peoples Forum (APF) on the other hand are the two "deliberative forums" that have been set up and organized by the two aforementioned networks: the APA was organized by ASEAN-ISIS; the APF was arranged by the SAPA. In the same way the eighteenth century coffee houses, salons, and *Tischgesellschaften* hosting the rational-critical discussions among the bourgeois publics, the APA and APF are also considered as the two prime candidates to inherit this task particularly at the ASEAN level. The only difference between these transnational deliberative forum with their European predecessors are in terms of the driving force behind them. While the bourgeois public sphere was sparked by the bourgeois economic owners" concerns against the absolutism of the political authority, the participants in those ASEAN public spheres solely concern with their mission to empower the political efficacy of ASEAN"s demos themselves.

Last but not least, the communicative structures in the Southeast Asia will be scrutinized for the sake of revealing to what extent they are accorded the critical, open, free, and inclusive arrangement dealing with ASEAN issues. ASEAN's, national, and civil society's media shall be explored and the scope examined shall be narrowed to their reporting on ASEAN affairs only. It will be tackled from the perspective of their degree of the critical publicity and interconnections with the previously scrutinized transnational civil society in the Southeast Asia as well as the "triple power helix" of the ASEAN"s political authority. Hence, in almost the same fashion as the European critical journals and political newspapers attached themselves to the critical discussions in the coffee houses, salons, and *Tischgesellschaften*, this inquiry set to examine the very same attachments between the SAPA"s-organized APF with the media infrastructure across the Southeast Asia region. Due to the fact that this region boasts of diverse languages and dialects, this investigation shall only be limited to involve the English sources. The degree of critical rational appearance between the ASEAN's, national's, and civil society's media shall also be further assessed. Apart from the ASEAN's civil society organizations-formulated

opinion contents, this particular section shall also pay some attention to the infrastructure capacity – the accessibility and ownership of media resources. By reconfiguring the rise of a cross-border communicative capacity as well as the broadening of the Southeast Asian demos, this section is set to provide some grassroots power-balancing vis-à-vis the current transnational political authority that has yet to be unleashed thus far. Table 1 below summarizes the envisioned operationalization of the three structural preconditions for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres.

TABLE 1. Three ASEAN Public Spheres Structural Focuses

ASEAN political structure	Transnational civil society structure in Southeast Asia	Communicative structure in Southeast Asia
ASEAN Summit	ASEAN-ISIS and ASEAN People's Assembly (APA)	ASEAN's Media
ASEAN Community Councils	Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA)	National Media
ASEAN Secretariat	ASEAN People's Forum (APF)	Civil Society's Media

Methodology

This inquiry can be categorized particularly under the "qualitative approach" box. Apart from the considerably salient philosophical stance that I have already elaborated in the previous chapter, the "strategies of inquiry" as well as the nature of "research practices" possessed by the qualitative approach are also unequivocally leaning towards this research interest. In terms of the strategy of inquiry, case study is considered as the best way to scrutinize ASEAN structures from the reconfigured transnational public sphere theory. In general, case studies is "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals in more in depth way. Cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time" (Stake, 1995, cited from Creswell 2009, p.11). To that end, three parallel data-gathering processes had been conducted.

The concrete data collection method for this inquiry is distinguished based on each of the involved transnational public sphere structures developed in the previous three theoretical sections. Firstly, all relevant published documents– ASEAN Charter document, ASEAN Community Blueprints, as well as ASEAN-ISIS official documents – had been engaged. All of the documents had been collected directly from ASEAN official website. The

step is considered significant due to the fact that in order to answer the first research question, the essence of ASEAN political structures' evolution since its inceptions can only be grasped through ASEAN official documents. Furthermore, through the details as well as the context that the documents provides, the exact ASEAN progress toward more responsive and more people-centered orientation can be gauged. This is in line with Habermas' original conception of public sphere – the existence of responsive political authority.

Secondly, the "Joint Statement of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples" Forum (ACSC/APF)" had also been scrutinized. Two official websites provide ample opportunity with regard to the first-hand source, namely the ASEAN Official Website as well as each of SAPA's major networking websites, reference has been made to their collective advocacy in the ASEAN Community building. SAPA reports, as well as the existing academic literatures on the APA, APF, and ASEAN had also been critically reviewed. This particular data-gathering step is deemed critical since in order to answer the second research question, a comprehensive information on civil society organizations (CSOs) that engage at ASEAN level need to be comprehend. Thus, through the official websites of each of the CSOs, the data had been accessed and downloaded – who they are, what are their objectives, what are their activities, and finally they had been evaluated from the perspective of how inclusive they are in terms of membership and mobilization, as well as how critical they are toward ASEAN. If the first data-gathering step concerned "ASEAN Kratos", this second step is concerned with "ASEAN Demos".

The third and final data-gathering step is related to the linchpin that connects ASEAN Demos to ASEAN Kratos: the media. There are two different types of media involved: the new media and the traditional media. Through the new media, channels such as the ASEAN's Facebook page, along with SAPA Facebook page had been browsed, respectively along with other alternative media[1]. In terms of the traditional media, the English newspapers in ten ASEAN countries had been explored. The papers explored are The Nation (Thailand), The Phnom Penh Post (Cambodia), Viet Nam News (Vietnam), the Straits Times (Singapore), The Star (Malaysia), Brunei Times (Brunei), Vientiane Times (Laos), The Myanmar Times (Myanmar), The Philippines Daily Inquirer (Philippines), and The Jakarta Post (Indonesia). Nevertheless, each of the selected media were only analyzed through their online contents. This selection had to be done since in order to be categorized as "ASEAN-level media", they must be accessible across all ten ASEAN member countries. This step is crucial since its provide a comprehensive view of to what extent does the voice of ASEAN Demos has been transmitted among ASEAN Demos themselves, as well as to what extent their voice had been listened by ASEAN Kratos. This had been analyze through the usage of "ASEAN-related" keywords in each of the media. While the traditional media were expected to be more of "top-down" oriented, the new media – particularly those owned

by CSOs – were expected to be more "bottom-up" in terms of their contents.

Table 2 below summarizes the data collection methods for each of the ASEAN public sphere structures.

TABLE 2. Data Collection Method for the Inquiry of this Study

ASEAN Public Sphere Structures	Data Sources
ASEAN Political Structures	ASEAN officials speeches, Official websites, Official documents, Literature
Transnational Civil Society Structures in Southeast Asia	Published documents, transnational civil society websites, Literature
Media Structures in Southeast Asia	English newspapers websites, portals, Literature

Finding 1: ASEAN Political Authority

Incepted as a loose cooperative intergovernmental pact between the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia amidst the Cold War, ASEAN was prompted to evolve gradually – not only in terms of its membership, but also from the perspective of its guiding principles and rules. The ASEAN Secretariat was established with a Secretary-General post headquartered in Jakarta in 1976. ASEAN's later transition towards the ASEAN Community project has further discarded its early Realist-adherence nature. The rise of globalization, in particular the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis that infringed the region, nevertheless had transcended the pace of the Southeast Asian transnational governance-political architecture evolutions. The surge of non-traditional security concerns across the region leaves the leaders of the ten ASEAN countries to one common path: to partially submit their absolute nation states authority to a more supranational order of ASEAN. Therefore, through the primary data gathered from the ASEAN official websites, the current state of ASEAN's political authority that consisted of the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Community Councils, as well as the ASEAN Secretariat – that is subjected to the ASEAN Charter – has been gradually opened in terms of their accountability and receptive level to the public opinion.

As compared to the ASEAN's original purposes enshrined in the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, the 2007 ASEAN Charter has expanded its purposes. In terms of ASEAN"s shift towards "democracy" and "people-oriented" aspirations, the fourth, seventh, and thirteenth "Purposes" of ASEAN are of

relevance here.

> "To ensure that the peoples and Member States of ASEAN live in peace with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment" (ASEAN‟s fourth purpose, ASEAN Charter, p.4)

> "To strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, with due regard to the rights and responsibilities of the Member States of ASEAN" (ASEAN‟s seventh purpose, ASEAN Charter, p.4)

> "To promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community building" (ASEAN‟s thirteenth purpose, ASEAN Charter, p.5)

More surprisingly, those democratic aspirations were relatively manifested in the Article 14 of the ASEAN Charter – in which the proposal for the establishment of "ASEAN Human Rights Body" was officially rendered for the first time. It states that "[I]n conformity with the purposes and principles of the ASEAN Charter relating to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, ASEAN shall establish an ASEAN human rights body" (ASEAN Charter, p.19). Furthermore, one of the three key ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) characteristics, namely a "rules-based community of shared values and norms" has even outlined a list of critical concrete sub-actions that are related to the democratic norms. Pages 3 and 4 of the APSC Blueprint particularly point out the following guidelines:

> "Intensify exchange of experience and training courses in order to enhance popular and broader participation"

> "Hold seminars/workshops to share experiences on democratic institutions, gender mainstreaming, and popular participation"

> "Encourage the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information (AMRI) to develop an institutional framework to facilitate free flow of information, based on each country‟s national laws, by establishing an information baseline of these laws and to submit a progress report to the ASEAN Political-Security Community Council"

> "Request each ASEAN Member State to develop relevant media exchange programmes to aid free flow of information, starting within

three months from the adoption of this Blueprint"

"Enhance media capacity to promote regional-community building, explore the possibility of establishing an ASEAN media panel to boost cooperation and collaboration among the mediarelated institutions and organizations with emphasis on the process of the implementation of the APSC Blueprint"

"Implement internships, fellowships, scholarships and workshops, study visits and journalist exchange programs to enhance media capacity and professionalism in the region with emphasis on the process of the implementation of the APSC Blueprint"

"Facilitate co-production and exchanges of films, TVs, animations, games and new media content to promote cultural exchanges with emphasis on the process of the implementation of the APSC Blueprint" (APSC Blueprint, p.3-4).

With such assertion on "free flow of information", "media exchange programs", as well as the "media capacity" that were explicitly displayed in the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint, it can be said that a solid foundation for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres has been laid in the ASEAN‟s political authority structure.

ASEAN‟s survival, let alone its gradual progress towards a single Community dream, has been very astonishing. Nevertheless, with such a highly elitist "ASEAN Way" of a decision-making process that has been revealed, how can a democratic adherence to the public opinion stand a chance in the course of the ASEAN Community building? It should be noted here that the problem is not at all about the absence of specific "political authorities" within ASEAN that are capable to carry out any decisive take concerning the region. Instead, it is the "sluices" where the ASEAN‟s demos‟ public opinion can compel those authorities that are crucial for the emergence of the ASEAN public spheres. Also, the advent of the late twentieth century globalization influx has obviously increased the feasibility of those kinds of channels or sluices in ASEAN. I maintain that the existence of sluices for the reception of public opinion into the supranational governance structure – in this case, rendered by the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN Community Blueprints – can be deemed highly substantive. In sum, ASEAN's political structures are indeed very promising for the cultivation of the public opinion to be admitted into the public spheres at the ASEAN level.

Finding 2: ASEAN Discursive Publics

From the annual report as well as their critical articles and activities that widely circulated on web, the expansion of scope for advocacy works by CSOs at the ASEAN level can be observed. Two of the most valuable sources in that particular respect are the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) and the Solidarity of Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA). Both civil society networks organize their own sort of "transnational deliberative forum" involving direct participation from the ASEAN's demos. The ASEAN People's Assembly (APA) was organized by ASEAN-ISIS, meanwhile SAPA was responsible for the continuity of the ASEAN People's Forum (APF). ASEAN-ISIS – consisted mostly of the academic and think-tank groups – set the first regional civil society moves to engage ASEAN leaders via the APA. This dialogue integrally serves as a "bridge" between civil society organizations in the Southeast Asia with the ASEAN senior officials.

Apart from the norms of publicity qualities, the political impact of civil society"s dialogue is another critical source of societal transformation that needs to be scrutinized from the transnational public sphere"s perspective (Crack 2008, p.149). This particular impact – collectively formulated will and opinion – upon the governing institutions, is summarized as "political efficacy". Indeed, even those civil society organizations that participate in the very first meeting of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ASCS) already acknowledge the value of their collectively formulated will- and opinion in relation to the ASEAN"s governance:

> "Civil society participants recognized the need for more openness and transparency at all levels of the ASEAN power structure in order to secure greater accountability and allow civil society to effectively play their roles as watchdogs, monitors and early warning systems. Towards this end, the deep feeling was that civil society was not getting access to accurate, relevant and timely information on matters of concern to the people" (Statement of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference to the 11th ASEAN Summit, 9 December 2005, p.2).

I continue to investigate the degree of ASEAN"s civil society organizations" political efficacy from three perspectives: the ASEAN Charter drafting process, interface meeting with ASEAN Summit, and their involvement with ASEAN Community Councils.

ASEAN Charter Drafting

As a fundamental framework that serves as a legal foundation for ASEAN, input from ASEAN"s demos as well as the actual outcomes of the engagement

in ASEAN Charter can be considered the perfect litmus test from the "political efficacy" point of view. Nevertheless, most of the submissions prepared by civil society organizations – represented by SAPA –obviously did not make it into the final document of the ASEAN Charter.

On the other hand, in spite of the projected benefits offered by the APA, the majority of the dialogue participants were not happy with the APA's "exclusiveness" and its continuous "uncritical stance" towards most of the ASEAN's policies. APA's severe lack of "norms of publicity" has resulted in the birth of the SAPA and APF. The SAPA has been very proactive from the beginning; not only that it stimulates the APF, but it also continuously empowers the grassroots to be able to engage ASEAN. Along with their perseverance in providing critical check and balances towards ASEAN – whether in the ASEAN Charter drafting process or various engagements with the ASEAN Community Councils – the valuable presence of the transnational network of civil society organizations in ASEAN definitely substantiates the ASEAN public spheres.

However, just by participating in a number of consultative meetings with ASEAN"s representatives without a full capacity to decide on the final version of the Charter – as in the European Constitution referendum case – shall not make ASEAN"s civil society organizations pass the "political efficacy" test with excellence. Furthermore, the distrust and frustration among some of the civil society organizations towards the whole ASEAN Charter drafting process are far from minimal:

> "The EPG says it has met civil society groups but many have not heard about the Charter…Critics suspect the lack of public consultation over the Charter could be due to the real intention behind the blueprint. They see the charter as giving a legal personality to ASEAN, paving the way for a regional economic framework that would facilitate investment and trade in the region, while the interests of ordinary people- workers, the poor and the marginalized- could come a distant second" (Anil Netto, cited from Jörn Dosch 2008, p.77-78).

Despite the unfortunate degree of participation in the ASEAN Charter drafting the consultative process, civil society organizations in ASEAN nevertheless should be proud of themselves. In terms of perseverance and resilience, they have proven that they are more than just a rubber stamp or plain observer. We should never forget that they were facing an entity that was yet to be fully democratic – at least in terms of its openness to their people"s participation – when it comes to gauging the ASEAN"s civil society organizations political efficacy from the Charter drafting perspective. It is appropriate for us now to move on to analyze their political efficacy in terms of their direct interface meeting with ASEAN leaders.

Interface Meeting with the ASEAN Summit

The introduction of the "interface meeting" between the civil society organization˝s representatives with ASEAN leaders by the Malaysian government during the 2005 ASEAN Summit has paved the way for highly critical opinions and voices to be echoed at the ASEAN level. For instance, these were among the crucial inputs that had been briefed in that particular ASEAN Summit:

> "Participants urge the ASEAN Summit to reconsider the „ASEAN way" of dealing with these trans-boundary challenges so that swift and effective action can be taken in the interest of the people. The principle of consensus should not hinder ASEAN from acting decisively on behalf of justice when the situation so demands" (Proposal Five, Statement of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference to the 11th ASEAN Summit, 9 December 2005, p.4).

> "Our population structure demands that women, youth and indigenous people are adequately represented at all levels of decision making processes within ASEAN. Civil Society urges greater focus and attention to women, youth and indigenous peoples. Recognizing their rights and broadening their participation in society will go a long way in creating a safer, more stable and caring ASEAN community. ASEAN governments should also ensure that they have equitable access to healthcare services particularly in relation to reproductive health and HIV/AIDS" (Proposal Nine, Statement of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference to the 11th ASEAN Summit, 9 December 2005, p.7).

Such profound and critical proposals – directly presented to the ASEAN leaders – were nowhere to be found in the previous Track-II Dialogue (APA). Regardless of the outcomes, such platform has been considered positively by civil society organizations:

> "The interface meeting is symbolic. You cannot expect anything to come out from that. But that is not the point. The point is the gesture, the political gesture. Because this is about institutionalization. Institutionalization means we have to have this meeting as a formal agenda of the leaders. So we have to do it every year, no matter whether the host country is ready or not. As it is a tradition, we have to do it" (Yuyun Wahyuningrum interview by Quayle 2013, p.126).

Involvement in the ASEAN Community Councils

Apart from the ASEAN Summit, the ASEAN Community Councils is another ASEAN‟s political machinery that has to be reckoned with. In parallel with the Southeast Asian civil society organizations‟ vows during the 2nd ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) 2006:

> "We resolve to continue to engage with and challenge the ASEAN at all levels, making use of all available spaces and opportunities to defend and advance the rights and interests of the marginalized and excluded people in the region. We further resolve to strengthen our ranks and expand our initiative in solidarity and movement building, challenge ourselves to be more inclusive and participatory, and respond to issues of urgent concern in a timely manner. We commit to build an ASEAN People's Charter that reflects the rights, interests and aspirations of all peoples in the ASEAN region…We demand that the ASEAN create effective mechanisms for transparency, accountability and people's participation. In particular, we demand for automatic civil society seats in all decision making processes of the ASEAN" (Statement of the 2nd ASEAN Civil Society Conference, 12 December 2006).

Comprised of three distinctive Councils – the ASEAN Political Security Council, ASEAN Economic Council, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Council – ASEAN Community Councils are much more administrative in nature and less political as compared to the ASEAN Summit. Therefore, it is tacitly much easier for civil society organizations to engage ASEAN Community Councils as recognized by one of their representatives:

> "The sectorals…continue to engage, and I think, when the level is higher, then the conflict becomes higher. When the level is lower, we can talk more [about] substance and engaging… So, we come here, because we have a common interest, a common goal, a common concern. With the ASEAN leaders, we don‟t have a common and straight-to-the-point goal…But when it comes to issue-based [meetings], we share the language. Then the communication happens, because we share the concern" (Quayle 2013, p.138, interview with Yuyun Wahyuningrum).

Nevertheless, these relationships are still relatively problematic, especially when it comes to the ASEAN Economic Council. Leftist organizations, for instance, was hesitant to engage ASEAN in this particular area due to its projection as a "neoliberal organization" that opposes the ideas of social justice:

"For this reason, I think a lot of the advocacy issues around the trade and investment agenda have not really been pushed for in an appropriate manner… it"s a pity, because you cannot change ASEAN unless you actually try to sit down and talk to them (Quayle 2013, p.128, interview with Chandra).

Evidently, these networks have succeeded in stimulating counter-hegemonic discourses across the region. The phenomenon of the transnational civil society organizations" engagement in the regionalization process in the Southeast Asia implies that ASEAN is gradually transformed by the "regionalism from below" forces. In one way or another, the critical mass supports are obviously valuable resources as it was the case with the SAPA-led APF. However, only by relying on the existence of such resources alone – as Social Constructivist and English School theorists tend to do – shall conceal scholarly research from the potential of one critical force that must be reckoned with when it comes to the emancipation subjects: public opinion. To add, there is no other medium that is more appropriate to be approached in order to investigate ASEAN"s demos" public opinion than the media and communication infrastructure. Let us then turn to investigate the critical public opinion underpinnings of the ASEAN public spheres in the next finding.

Finding 3: ASEAN Trans-border Communicative Infrastructure

I have focused on the potential of the new media in the contemporary Southeast Asia: the Internet. Due to a rather plural history engulfing each of the ten ASEAN countries, I provide a macro-overview pertaining to not only the trans-border media infrastructure in the region, but also the circulations of the ASEAN's civil society organizations' formulated opinions into each of those countries. This encompassing overview is deemed more than essential since the central concerns of the public sphere precepts are highly related to the circulations of the "critical publicity", rather than the "manipulative" publicity. Thus, instead of narrowing my focus only on the officially reported news regarding ASEAN affairs, it is more normatively crucial for me to highlight the civil society organizations-formed opinions on ASEAN. In this case, a high degree of critical debates reported in the media that stems from the APF indicate a high degree of "critical publicity" in the Southeast Asian's media infrastructure.

Nevertheless, some identified impediments such as the asymmetric patterns of the media ownership and the state censorship in some ASEAN countries had restricted this critical publicity from being unleashed to the fullest. The combination of those impediments has exacerbated ASEAN's demos' access to information, especially to those critical opinions formulated by the civil society organizations upon regional affairs. This condition deteriorated

their opportunities for trans-boundary deliberative political mobilization. On the other hand, this study finds that the relationship between business profit interests and the circulation of critical publicity among ASEAN's demos on ASEAN affairs are rather symbiotic in manner. It is not so much confined in the "colonization" nature as depicted by Habermas.

In the Southeast Asia case, business news has almost always taken a main portion of news that allocated to make coverage of ASEAN. Not only in The Star (Malaysia) and The Straits Times (Singapore), even in the Vietnam News (Vietnam) and the Vientiane Times (Laos) the reports on ASEAN''s market integration, local business readiness, and the country''s market resilience to compete in the upcoming ASEAN Economic Community progress have been published consistently. Even the ratio of their coverage on the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) project compared to the coverage on the ASEAN SocioCultural Community (ASCC) project is almost incalculable. Nevertheless, the existence of "forum" or space for "public opinion formation and debates" – particularly in The Star (Malaysia) – has proven to be crucial. A recent collaboration project between the CIMB Group (Malaysia), Star Publications (M) Bhd (Malaysia), The Jakarta Post (Indonesia), The Nation (Thailand), and The Philippine Daily Inquirer (Philippines) has been forged in, where a so-called "CIMB-ASEAN e-paper" has been launched in the effort to reach out to 450 million of ASEAN''s 600 million population. The Jakarta Post (Indonesia), The Nation (Thailand), and The Philippine Daily Inquirer (Philippines) are highly productive in publishing a vast array of critical views and opinions on ASEAN. Under this business-oriented networking project, the proliferation and circulation of critical publicity across four ASEAN countries involved marked a unique symbiotic relationship between the business profit and critical media that shall benefit the media''s prerequisite for the emergence of ASEAN public spheres.

Quite in an opposite manner as compared to Habermas' suspicion with regard to the "colonization" of business and market interests upon the criticalness of media, the Southeast Asian context gave us somewhat a "symbiotic" picture of the relationship between them. Built upon the collaboration between the CIMB Group (Malaysia), Star Publications (M) Bhd (Malaysia), The Jakarta Post (Indonesia), The Nation (Thailand) and The Philippine Daily Inquirer (Philippines), a so-called "CIMB-ASEAN e-paper" has been launched. With numerous critical articles on ASEAN that have always been centered in each of those four national newspapers, the expanding effort that is originally stimulated by business profits interest is simultaneously expanding the proliferation of the critical opinion on ASEAN across the four countries. It can be anticipated that the media infrastructure in ASEAN are currently progressing rapidly towards more people-centered notions and thus, has provided a conducive milieu for the emergence of the ASEAN public sphere.

Discussion & Conclusion

This inquiry is anchored on the Habermas' public sphere theory that originally recounts the rise and dissolution of the eighteenth century bourgeois society in Europe. I employed his public sphere's structural prerequisites in order to assess the prospects of the present Southeast Asian citizens – or ASEAN's demos – to substantively involve in the ASEAN Community building project. Despite of the "people-centered" notions that can be found everywhere in ASEAN Community documents, the actual progress does not seem to support the slogans. There is nothing more apparent to prove this reality as compared to the series of exclusive back-door negotiations by the ultimate political authority in ASEAN – the ASEAN Summit – that monopolizes the crucial regional decision-making authority. This elitist "ASEAN Way" was also moving hand in hand with the privilege enjoyed by the large corporations with regard to the massive developmental project – both at the expense of ASEAN's demos' voices. Nevertheless, I did not opt for the pessimistic stance that has been taken by most of the contemporary Southeast Asian scholars when discussing democratization prospects in ASEAN. I continue to investigate the potential patterns that might converge and lead to the emergence of the ASEAN public spheres. For this purpose, I specifically modified the definition of the ASEAN public sphere: "a transnational site of deliberation in which civil society organizations reach understandings about issues of common concern in ASEAN according to the norms of publicity". I reconstruct the structural requirements for the emergence of the public sphere to be implemented in the context of the contemporary ASEAN's settings. Three outlined structural preconditions for the emergence of the ASEAN public spheres were: accountable and receptive governance authority; inclusive, deliberative, and critical activist networks; as well as free and open media infrastructure. Each of those underlined normative prerequisites has been critically compared against the eventual realities dwelling in Southeast Asia.

Throughout this paper, I contest that the central position acquired by the media apparatus under this particular theory is integral. On the other hand, by employing this reconfigured theoretical design, I had identified the way democracy can be enhanced at the ASEAN level in parallel with the ASEAN Community trajectory. Far from being a pro-status quo or state-centric as in the case of the Realist theory, the modified ASEAN public sphere perspective questioning the monopoly of decision-making capacity in the hands of ten ASEAN Summit's leaders. By acknowledging the nation states' prowess in ASEAN, this theory escaped the utopia promoted by the Pluralist's view – accommodating, rather than rejecting the authority possessed by the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Community Councils, and ASEAN Secretariat. By emphasizing the multifaceted challenges faced by the ASEAN's demos, this modified theory had also overcoming the weakness of Neo-Marxism theory:

limited material disparities-focused. This theory also strongly subjected the notion of "ASEAN Way" into the scrutiny – as opposed to the "uncritical" stance of the "appreciative" Social Constructivism theory. By positing the importance of the existence of a critical, free, and widespread media, the application of ASEAN public sphere conceptualizations had been able to despise the exclusivity of the civil society activism at the expense of wider ASEAN's publics or demos – as opposed to the English School's approach (Quayle 2012; 2013). As compared to the Neo-Communitarian theory that relies almost entirely on the "ideal" consensus formation among diverse civil society organizations in the international arena (Azizudin Sani & Abu Bakar 2013), the ASEAN public spheres' perspective are more reasonable. Not only it posits the possibility of the incoherency among the civil society organizations via transnational deliberative forum, but also proposed a remedy: the variants of "critical publicity" carried by transnational media infrastructure.

On the other hand, it is beyond dispute that the role of trans-border communicative infrastructure vis-à-vis transnational political authority and transnational civil society organizations network has been staged primarily by the Habermas-inspired transnational public sphere theory. In that regard, the capacity of critical publicity to be dispersed across the region against traditional impediments – whether spatial or temporal – has been reconciled to a certain degree. Most notably, by the rise of ICT that goes hand in hand with the globalization. Hence, the application of transnational public sphere normative preconditions – reconstructed into the search for the ASEAN public sphere in this inquiry – shall contribute significantly from the international organizations' democratization's point of view. By incorporating the forms of political participation among ASEAN's demos via the ICT, a wider debate that accelerated ASEAN's demos' efficacy was not being excluded.

End Notes

1.   South East Asian Committee for Advocacy website (SEACA.net); Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA) Working Group; Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) website; Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (AsiaDHRRA) website; Third World Network (TWN) website; Focus on the Global South (FOCUS) website; The Irrawaddy.

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