

**Eva-Lotta E. Hedman**, *In the Name of Civil Society. From Free Election Movements to People Power in the Philippines*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006, 268pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-8248-2921-6 (hardcover).

When considering the ten ASEAN countries in Southeast Asia, one country stands out as being somewhat different, and this despite an already very high regional degree of political, economic and cultural heterogeneity in the region.. This difference was also noticeable during the 1980s and 1990s, where the discourse on Asian Values was at its height and the Southeast Asian tiger economies at their peak. This particular country was not a party to the developments that otherwise characterized the region. We are of course talking about the Philippines. With its long tradition of democratic elections, rapid change-over of presidents, religious status as a Catholic country in an otherwise Muslim and Buddhist dominated region, and Spanish and American colonial past, it stands apart from the other countries in the region. The assemblage of these characteristics are what makes the Philippines unique in a Southeast Asian context.

Focusing exclusively on the Philippines during the period 1953-2001, the main theme of Hedman's book is the politics of civil society, not the institutional or the political setup, but how civil society in all its complexity constitutes a societal force that is capable of keeping presidential abuses of power in check. Criticizing a Tocquevillean perspective on Filipino civil society and liberal democracy, which states that a pluralist and self-organizing civil society independent of the state is an indispensable condition of democracy, Hedman proposes a Gramscian perspective instead. In contrast to the Tocquevillean concern with the tyranny of the majority, the puzzle of minority rule under conditions of formal democracy informed Gramsci's writing on the significance and role of a 'dense' civil society in complementing and reinforcing the coercive state under capitalism. According to Hedman (p. 6), rather than viewing civil society as a constraint or a counterbalance against state power, Gramsci argued that the assemblage of entities commonly called private – including various civic associations and religious institutions – help to maintain the power of the bourgeois state by facilitating rule through the mobilization of consent, or in his terminology, hegemony.

It is thus not argued that the state per se is the problem in relation to civil society and all the more or less fragmented civic forces out there, rather the problem is deemed to lie with those who man the state apparatus, misappropriating it to their own advantage. The state per se is thus perceived as a vital body within a capitalist society and not a

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power that tends to dominate and control civil society to the advantage of the bourgeois, as stated in orthodox Marxism. Gramsci thus drew attention to the role of schools, churches and what are often referred to as secondary associations as transmission belts for the assertion of universalist leadership by what he called a 'dominant' or 'historic' bloc of social forces. Gramsci thus suggested that mobilization *in the name of* civil society is dependent on the success of calls to citizens and performative displays of citizenship against other appeals and articulations of identity such as class. According to Hedman, Gramsci provided analytical tools for grappling with the key questions that are left unanswered by the Tocquevillean traditions, namely when, where, by whom and how mobilization in the name of civil society is to be undertaken. Civil society is thus to be conceptualized as a process or event that is capable of initiating (political) mobilization of various sub-social and/or political entities. These political entities are capable of transforming themselves into a coherent societal body that can act as a counteracting political force in the face of official abuses of power (pp. 8-9).

Beginning with the ousting of President Elpidio Quirino in 1953 and of President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, and ending up with the ousting of President Joseph 'Erap' Estrada in 2001, Hedman covers in detail the empirical field of election-watch movements (NAMFRELs) within civil society, thus demonstrating a keen insight into the political history of the Philippines. There are, however, some problems with the way in which she perceives societal processes in such a highly politically loaded context. Her analysis avoids digging too deeply into the underlying social and political forces that define the dynamics driving Filipino civil society. This is due to her adopting a Gramscian universalist approach rather than taking the localized nature of the Filipino society into account. A pertinent point here is that Hedman ignores the issue of why civil societies in other Southeast Asian countries fail to display similar patterns of reaction towards political and/or economic abuses by the dominant elite, as evidenced in the Filipino case. In this sense she fails to verify the validity of her Gramscian inspired approach within a regional context.

Hedman does claim that the Filipino election movement NAMFREL has fielded similar election monitoring movements in several other parts of Southeast Asia, such as COMFREL (Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia), UNFREL (University Network for Free Elections in Indonesia) and ANFREL (Asian Network of Free Elections), as well as 'People Power' movements in Burma and Thailand. Whatever the

similarities among these countries, this does not explain the 'flow' of civic social and political power in these more or less authoritarian and elite-oriented regimes in Southeast Asia – regimes that are outwardly highly resilient towards 'people power'. In Indonesia, the transition towards democracy in Indonesia was initiated by the financial crisis of 1997 before being hijacked by the Indonesian political and economic elite. In Malaysia and Singapore, elections are heavily engineered by the dominant political constellation organized within UMNO and PAP. In Thailand, however, the military is the main 'societal' force that determines how and when the ruling elite is to be replaced. What I am arguing here is that a Gramscian universalist perspective is not applicable in a region that is characterized by a very high degree of political, economic and cultural pluralism – a pluralism that is further reinforced by the impact of current global processes in all their multiplicity.

Returning to the case of the Philippines, the Gramscian perspective does not explain why those presidents who abuse their powers came to be elected president in the first place. Generally speaking, it is the hegemonic bloc that 'elects' a representative to the position of president – a representative whose job it is to secure the hegemonic bloc's grip on power. Hedman does not explain why the hegemonic bloc has been so seriously wrong when 'electing', or should I say selecting, their representative. Instead the analysis is painted from a black and white perspective. It does not take into account the various fractions of 'people power', some of which are quite problematic in terms of varying degrees of corrupt internal practices. For example, the business community and the army (who are mostly white) together with the president, indulge in all sorts of criminal and corrupt practices to the detriment of jeopardising the society at large, who are mainly black.

Providing answers to these kind of questions is just as important as providing a detailed account of Filipino civil society in times of political crisis, employing a rather stuffy theoretical approach that was developed specifically to explain socio-political events in an Italian context during the early twentieth century. History does provide the analyst with vital clues toward an explanation of today's social and political manifestations. However, ignoring the current impact of global processes on local economic, political, social and cultural matters leaves the analyst with a superficial or, even worse, only a political-ideological understanding of local processes of societal diversification.

Notwithstanding this weakness in her analysis, Eva-Lotta Hedman does provide the reader with a detailed account of the various societal

movements that led to the ouster of three Filipino presidents, who confused or merged their position with private interests. How those individuals attained their positions in the first place is left unanswered. The answer would seem to be found in exactly those groupings that led to their exit when the person in power abused his position – not because of the position per se but because of the persons (s)elected!

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