

# Identifying Key Determinants of Civil Society Robustness in Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

The research examines the key determinants of civil society robustness in Southeast Asia, addressing a significant gap in quantitative research within the region. Utilizing the beta regression model on data spanning from 1986 to 2023, the researcher explores the impact of participatory democracy, civil liberty, political stability, the rule of law, and neopatrimonialism on civil society's robustness. Moderating effects of GDP per capita, control of corruption, freedom of expression, and digital freedom accessibility are also considered. Findings reveal that participatory democracy and civil liberties significantly enhance civil society's robustness, whereas political instability tends to undermine it. Surprisingly, neopatrimonialism shows a positive influence, suggesting complex adaptive strategies by civil organizations. Along with the insignificant result of the rule of law, neopatrimonialism challenges conventional views, standing out among the variables analyzed. The research contributes to understanding the multifaceted dynamics of civil society in Southeast Asia, offering insights for policymakers and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to foster democratic governance and social justice. It underscores the necessity for region-specific strategies acknowledging the unique political, economic, and cultural landscapes of Southeast Asian countries.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asia, civil society's robustness, participatory democracy, civil liberty, political stability, neopatrimonialism, beta regression

## Introduction

The role of civil society in shaping political, social, and economic outcomes in Southeast Asia has garnered significant attention in the scholarly community, reflecting a broad consensus on its importance in fostering democratic governance, accountability, and social

cohesion (Bünthe & Weiss, 2023; Edwards, 2019; Ganesan, 2015; Hansson & Weiss, 2023). Civil society, encompassing a wide array of non-governmental organizations, community groups, labor unions, and social movements, serves as a critical intermediary between the state and the citizenry, advocating for public interests and providing services where governmental capacities may be limited (Chandoke, 1995; Edwards, 2019). In the context of Southeast Asia, a region characterized by diverse political regimes, economic disparities, and social challenges, the robustness of civil society has been both a reflection of and a response to the region's dynamic socio-political landscape (Case, 2002; Hansson & Weiss, 2023; Uhlin, 1997).

Acknowledging the vital role that civil society plays in the socioeconomic and political fabric of Southeast Asia, there remains a critical challenge in understanding how varying degrees of civil society robustness emerge across the region. This robustness, or lack thereof, directly impacts civil society's ability to influence policy, advocate for social justice, and engage in effective governance. Despite extensive scholarly investigation into the mechanisms of civil society globally, the Southeast Asian context presents unique challenges that are not fully addressed in existing literature. These challenges include navigating political restrictions, varying degrees of freedom of expression, economic constraints, and cultural differences that can facilitate or hinder the development and effectiveness of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) (Bünthe & Weiss, 2023). The deficiency in subtlety, region-specific research into these factors limits not only academic understanding but also the practical strategies that can be employed to bolster the effectiveness and resilience of civil society in Southeast Asia (Heinrich, 2005; Mercer, 2002).

Building upon the need for an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing civil society robustness in Southeast Asia, the research is designed to fill the existing research gap by systematically investigating how participatory democracy, civil liberty, political stability, rule of law, and neopatrimonialism contribute to or detract from the robustness of civil society within this region. Furthermore, it acknowledges the potential moderating effects of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, control of corruption, freedom of expression, and digital freedom accessibility on these relationships. Consequently, the primary objective of the research is to elucidate the complex interplay between these variables and their collective impact on the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia. Hence, this objective leads to the formulation of the main research question: What are the significant factors that affect the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia?

The research also addresses the notable gap in quantitative analyses, specifically focusing on civil society within the Southeast Asian context. Through rigorous statistical examination of the proposed independent and control variables, the research aims to fill a critical void in empirical evidence regarding the factors influencing civil society's robustness in the region. The quantitative approach not only allows for a precise measurement of the impact of each variable but also facilitates a comparative analysis that can highlight patterns and trends not immediately apparent through qualitative methods alone. By providing robust, data-driven insights, the research seeks to offer a solid foundation upon which policymakers, CSOs, and international actors can base more effective strategies for fostering a vibrant civil society's landscape in Southeast Asia. Therefore, it contributes significantly to

the literature on civil society's role in advancing democratic governance, social justice, and sustainable development across varied socio-political and economic settings.

The research utilizes secondary datasets to investigate the relationship between the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia and a set of predetermined variables. The datasets are sourced from reputable international organizations and research institutes, namely Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and World Bank's Data Bank, which provide comprehensive data on political, economic, and social indicators across Southeast Asian nations. Statistical analysis is conducted using beta regression models to accommodate the proportional nature of the dependent variable, allowing an in-depth examination of the effects of the independent and control variables. This approach enables the identification of significant predictors and their relative impact on civil society's robustness. Despite its strengths, this methodology bears limitations, notably the potential for data incompleteness and the challenge of accurately capturing the complex and multidimensional nature of civil society's robustness solely through available indicators. Furthermore, the reliance on secondary data limits the ability to control data collection methods and potential biases inherent in the original sources.

The research identifies and elucidates the significant determinants of civil society's robustness in Southeast Asia, providing new insights that contribute to understanding civil society's dynamics in the region. The findings reveal that participatory democracy and civil liberties significantly enhance civil society's robustness, while political stability plays a critical supporting role. Surprisingly, the research also identifies a positive impact of neopatrimonialism on civil society's robustness, challenging traditional assumptions and introducing a novel perspective into the interplay between civil society and governance structures. The research underscores the complexity of factors influencing civil society in Southeast Asia and highlights the unique adaptive strategies that civil societies may employ in diverse political environments.

Lastly, the research structure is systematically designed to guide the readers through the research process and findings. Following the introduction, the literature review section synthesizes existing research on civil society in Southeast Asia, identifying gaps the research aims to fill. The theoretical framework then delineates the conceptual underpinnings of civil society's robustness and outlines the expected relationships between the independent, dependent, and control variables. Subsequently, the methodology section provides a detailed account of the data sources, analytical techniques, and the rationale behind the choice of beta regression analysis. The results and discussion section presents the findings, interprets their implications for the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia, and contextualizes them within the broader scholarly discourse. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key insights, acknowledges the research limitations, suggests avenues for future research, and considers the practical implications of the research findings for policymakers, CSOs, and other stakeholders interested in strengthening civil society's role in the region.

## Literature Review

The scholarly examination of civil society, particularly in relation to democratization, spans a broad spectrum, ranging from theoretical explorations to empirical analyses. Theoretical discussions have historically focused on the genesis and evolution of civil society, delineating its varied manifestations across democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes and asserting its role as a barometer for democratization's trajectory (Aron, 1990; Bobbio, 1997; Chandoke, 1995; Hann & Dunn, 1996; Seligman, 1992). These foundational works underscore the distinct functions and challenges of civil societies within different political contexts, providing insights into their potential to influence democratic processes. Regarding this theoretical framework, empirical studies have investigated the impact of national contexts on the strength of civil societies, revealing the significant role that socio-political environments play in shaping civil society's capacity and effectiveness (Kamstra et al., 2016). Furthermore, specific attention has been directed toward the contributions of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in advocating for and safeguarding rights, such as gender equality and labor issues, highlighting the critical role of CSOs in advancing social justice and democratic values within various democratic settings (Chaney, 2016; Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2017). This multifaceted scholarly discourse forms the foundation for understanding civil society's intricate dynamics and its pivotal role in the democratization process, setting the stage for the subsequent exploration of civil society in the unique context of Southeast Asia.

Civil society, a term replete with complex interpretations and varying definitions, traditionally denotes the realm of organized social life that is voluntarily constituted, public in nature, and distinct from state apparatuses and familial structures (Bratton, 1994; Cohen & Arato, 1992; Meidinger, 2002). The historical roots of civil society theory extend back to early discussions on social contract by philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, further enriched by Adam Smith's notions on market dynamics, Kant's balance between law and freedom, and Tocqueville's emphasis on civic associations (Brinton, 2010; Hill, 2010; Laskar, 2013; Schmidt, 2010). The theoretical landscape is marked by three principal traditions—Hegelian, Marxian, and Gramscian—each offering distinct perspectives on civil society's role and interplay with the state and market forces (Chandoke, 1995; Katz, 2010; Klein, 2010). Gramsci's view of civil society as a site of contestation underscores its critical role in democratization and social reform, emphasizing the dynamic interactions between various actors, including NGOs, community groups, and social movements (Thompson, 2015). These organizations, diverse in their missions and scope, collectively contribute to civil society's capacity to advocate for change, monitor state activities, and engage in democratization processes (Charnovitz, 1996; Gemmil-Herren & Bamidele-Izu, 2002; Riaz & Rahman, 2016). The strength and effectiveness of civil society are thus perceived through lenses of autonomy, service functionality, and organizational participation, reflecting its essential role in advancing democracy, freedom, and social justice (Edwards, 2019; Fowler, 2000; Howell & Pearce, 2001; Kalm & Uhlin, 2015; Uphoff & Krishna, 2004).

The nexus between civil society robustness and democratic governance has been extensively studied, underscoring the critical role of civil society in shaping democratic landscapes. With its myriad organizations and movements, civil society functions as a fundamental pillar of democracy, providing citizens the autonomy and the means to engage in the political arena actively. John Keane's assertion that civil society operates as a crucial "realm of freedom" to democracy highlights the indispensable role of civil society in facilitating citizens' ability to define their identities, rights, and responsibilities within a political and legal framework (Keane, 1999). This realm of freedom is not only pivotal for the sustenance of democracy but also for the enhancement of political participation and democratic processes. Civil society's impact on democracy extends beyond mere participation. It embodies the principle of associationism, empowering individuals to collaboratively engage with and influence state mechanisms (Warren, 2000).

In Southeast Asia, a region characterized by diverse paths and experiences of democratization, civil society has emerged as a key factor in promoting democratic governance. The growth of intermediary associations, notably NGOs, in the wake of the third wave of democratization, illustrates civil society's expanding role in the democratic process. International NGOs in Southeast Asia, such as CARE Myanmar, Partners Asia, Save the Children Fund UK, and the Salvation Army, exemplify civil society's capacity to improve living standards, advocate for minority rights, and challenge authoritarian regimes, even under restrictive political conditions (Walton, 2015). These organizations, by mobilizing for social and political change, not only protect individual rights but also foster a culture of participatory democracy, where civil society robustness is both a product and a determinant of democratic governance. Through this lens, the experience of Southeast Asia underscores the symbiotic relationship between civil society and democracy, highlighting how civil society's freedom to operate, advocate, and mobilize can significantly influence the trajectory of democratization in developing contexts (Hansson & Weiss, 2023).

The robustness of civil society is not just about active engagement but also maintaining a critical distance from governmental structures to ensure genuine checks and balances within the political system. This dynamic is critical in fostering a political environment where civil society not only supports democratic transitions but also safeguards against the co-option by political elites. Therefore, it preserves its independence and effectiveness in advocacy (Stefes & Paturyan, 2021). Moreover, the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia can be seen as both product and prerequisite for enduring democratic governance, underpinning the region's complex interplay between state and society. In this light, civil society is not only reactive to political changes but also proactively shapes them, making it a foundational element in the stabilization and deepening of democracy.

Despite the pivotal role that civil society plays in promoting and sustaining democracy, critical gaps remain concerning its integration and influence within the frameworks of democratic governance. In many Southeast Asian contexts, a discrepancy exists between the theoretical empowerment of civil society and its practical execution. This gap is often widened by restrictive governmental policies, which limit the operational capacity of CSOs under the guise of national security or political stability. Additionally, the dependency on foreign

funding can sometimes skew the priorities of CSOs towards the interests of their donors rather than the local populace, leading to a disconnect between the organizations and the communities they aim to serve (Muskhelishvili & Jorjoliani, 2009).

Furthermore, while civil society is instrumental in bridging the gap between the state and the citizenry, its effectiveness is frequently undercut by a lack of coordination and a proliferation of smaller and less influential groups that struggle to exert meaningful influence on political processes. This fragmentation within civil society can lead to a dilution of efforts and a reduction in the potential to drive substantial democratic reforms (Broers, 2005; Jones, 2006; Muskhelishvili & Jorjoliani, 2009; Wheatley, 2010). Thus, for civil society in Southeast Asia to fully realize its role as a cornerstone of democracy, these critical gaps need addressing through enhanced legal protections, greater local funding opportunities, and stronger intra-sectoral alliances that align diverse initiatives towards common democratic goals.

The intricate interplay between civil society's robustness and the overarching frameworks of democracy, civil liberties, and political stability in Southeast Asia is a testament to the region's dynamic political landscape. As previously discussed, the robustness of civil society, defined by its independence and the active participation of its citizens, is not merely a byproduct of democratic environments but a cornerstone for their development and sustenance. According to Keane (1999), civil society embodies a realm of freedom indispensable to democracy, ensuring that citizens can choose their identities and responsibilities within a democratic framework. This perspective is echoed in the case studies of Southeast Asia, where civil society's engagement, particularly in countries experiencing varying degrees of democratization, highlights its pivotal role in promoting democratic values and processes (Bünthe & Weiss, 2023; Weiss, 2023).

Political stability and the rule of law emerge as critical factors influencing the robustness and effectiveness of CSOs. In environments where political volatility reigns, civil society often faces restrictions that impede its ability to function and contribute to democratic governance. Conversely, political stability can offer a fertile ground for civil society to thrive, advocating for transparency, good governance, and the protection of minority interests. However, the relationship between civil society and political regimes is complex, with less democratic systems posing significant challenges to civil society's autonomy and role as a watchdog for democracy (Edwards, 2019; Kamstra et al., 2016).

The legal framework within a country, underpinned by the rule of law, plays a crucial role in defining the operational space for civil society. Adequate rights and legal protections are essential for flourishing diverse social organizations and upholding societal accountability. The significance of a supportive legal environment for civil society is highlighted, emphasizing that without protected rights to associate, the potential for civil society to contribute effectively to policy-making and social advancement is greatly diminished (Salamon & Toepler, 2000). This dual emphasis on the rule of law and a conducive legal framework underscores the intricate interplay between civil liberties, legal structures, and the vitality of civil society in Southeast Asia (O'Donnell, 2005).

Neopatrimonialism, a hybrid state formation process originating from colonial rule, poses unique challenges and opportunities for civil society in Southeast Asia. This governance style, characterized by the fusion of personal and state interests, complicates civil society's engagement in democratic processes. According to Goh (2015), how colonial experiences in Malaysia and the Philippines have led to a distinct neopatrimonialism, affecting postcolonial state formation and civil society's role within it. The entanglement of colonial legacies with local power dynamics has perpetuated a governance style where personal networks often overshadow formal institutions, which reflects the region's colonial past and shapes the operational landscape for CSOs, influencing their strategies and interactions with the state. The recognition of neopatrimonialism as a significant factor in Southeast Asian governance underscores the necessity for civil society to traverse these complexities to foster democratic engagement and accountability (Hutchcroft, 2001; Bach, 2011).

The interplay between economic development and the robustness of civil society is a critical area of study, with GDP per capita often serving as a key indicator of economic health and its potential impact on civil society's capabilities. A higher GDP per capita is generally associated with a greater allocation of resources towards CSOs, enhancing their ability to engage in advocacy, service delivery, and policy influence. Economic prosperity also fosters a conducive environment for civic engagement and volunteerism since citizens in wealthier countries are more likely to have the time and resources to invest in civil society's activities. However, economic development alone does not guarantee a vibrant civil society. The quality of governance and the control of corruption play pivotal roles in determining the effectiveness of CSOs. High-quality governance, characterized by transparency, accountability, and participatory mechanisms, significantly enhances the operational space for civil society, enabling it to thrive and contribute to democratic processes and development outcomes (Kamstra et al., 2016; Lipset, 1994).

Furthermore, freedom of expression and digital accessibility is indispensable for the vitality of civil society, serving as moderating variables that enable or constrain civil society's efficacy. Freedom of expression allows CSOs to critique government policies, advocate for change, and mobilize public opinion. In contrast, digital freedom accessibility empowers civil society through the use of information and communication technologies to enhance outreach, advocacy, and mobilization efforts. In regions where these freedoms are curtailed, civil society faces significant challenges in its ability to operate effectively and fulfill its democratic functions. Conversely, in settings where expression freedoms and digital access are protected and promoted, civil society is better equipped to engage in policy dialogues, hold governments accountable, and foster democratic governance. The Southeast Asian context, with its varied political landscapes and levels of economic development, presents a complex picture of how these moderating variables impact civil society, underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which civil society can flourish (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; O'Donnell, 2005).

In addition, previous studies by Sinpeng and Koh (2023) and Alami et al. (2022) underscore that despite the rising cyber authoritarianism, digital news organizations in Southeast Asia continue to engage in critical journalism and civic engagement. These

organizations persist in reporting politically sensitive issues, motivated by the public good and an enduring commitment to democratic processes, even when faced with state repression. This resilience highlights the dual nature of digital spaces in the region—both as arenas for government control and platforms for democratic engagement. The findings suggest that while digital authoritarianism presents substantial challenges, it does not uniformly suppress civil society’s ability to support democratic transitions and maintain checks on political power.

Despite these abundant scholarly works, quantitative research on the robustness of civil society within Southeast Asia remains scarce. This scarcity emphasizes a critical need for rigorous, data-driven analyses that can quantitatively assess the multifaceted elements contributing to civil society’s strength and effectiveness in the region. While qualitative case studies have provided deep insights into the political, social, and economic contexts in which civil society operates, the paucity of quantitative studies limits comprehensive assessments of civil society’s broader patterns, challenges, and successes. Such research is essential for developing targeted strategies to enhance civil society’s capacity for advocacy, participation, and contribution to democratic governance. Addressing this gap, the researcher employs statistical methods to examine the relationships between civil society’s robustness and key variables like political stability, governance quality, and socioeconomic development. This analytical approach offers a more robust explanation of civil society’s role across the region, highlighting the importance of the research in shedding light on these critical dynamics.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the research serves as a foundational blueprint guiding the exploration of civil society’s robustness within Southeast Asia. It aims to delineate the constructs and variables under study, clarifying the relationships and mechanisms through which civil society influences and is influenced by the socio-political environment. This framework is instrumental in shaping the research questions, hypotheses, and the overall direction of the research. By systematically integrating theoretical perspectives on civil society and democratization, this framework elucidates the multifaceted role of CSOs in democratic governance and societal development. Specifically, it seeks to understand how varying degrees of participatory democracy, civil liberties, political stability, rule of law, and neopatrimonialism impact the robustness of civil society across different Southeast Asian contexts. This examination is critical, considering the region’s diverse political landscapes and the pivotal role of civil society plays in advocating for democratic processes, social justice, and accountability.

Civil society robustness, the dependent variable of the research, is defined within the context of Southeast Asian countries as the strength and resilience of CSOs to engage in civic and political activities independently and effectively. Robust civil society is characterized by its autonomy from state control, enabling citizens to pursue their political and civic goals freely. Dimensions of civil society’s robustness include the ability of CSOs to mobilize



resources, engage in policy advocacy, and influence governance outcomes, as well as the presence of legal and institutional environments that support such activities. Indicators of civil society's robustness, notably the Core Civil Society Index (CCSI), offer quantitative measures that reflect the extent to which civil society enjoys freedom from state interference and the capacity of citizens to engage in the democratic process actively (Bernhard et al., 2017; Pemstein et al., 2022). These dimensions and indicators provide a comprehensive framework for assessing the health and impact of civil society across Southeast Asian contexts.

The relationship between civil society and democratization has been extensively theorized, suggesting that a vibrant civil society is crucial for the development and consolidation of democratic governance. Theories in this domain posit that civil society contributes to democratization by facilitating political participation, enhancing governmental accountability, and fostering social capital among citizens. These functions are particularly pertinent in the Southeast Asian context, where the diversity of political regimes and historical trajectories of democratization presents unique challenges and opportunities for civil society. Drawing from key theoretical models, including those proposed by scholars such as Putnam et al. (1993) and Cohen and Arato (1992), the research examines the relevance of these theories to Southeast Asian countries, where civil society's role in democratization processes varies widely. By situating civil society within the public space that bridges the private sphere and the state, this theoretical exploration underscores the multifaceted ways in which civil society organizations contribute to and are shaped by the broader democratization and governance landscapes in Southeast Asia.

Participatory democracy stands as the first independent variable, encapsulating the breadth of citizen engagement beyond mere electoral participation to include involvement in CSOs and other non-electoral democratic processes. At its core, participatory democracy posits that genuine democracy extends beyond the ballot box, offering citizens continual opportunities to partake in decision-making processes that impact their lives actively. This engagement ranges from direct participation in CSOs to involvement in community meetings and collective actions. The underlying premise is that such participatory mechanisms enhance democratic governance by fostering social cohesion, improving governance quality, and elevating the overall quality of life within societies (Coppedge et al., 2015). Empirical evidence, including Garcia (2015) within the European Union context, supports the assertion that higher levels of participatory democracy correlate with the presence of more independent and autonomous civil society organizations. Thus, the research posits that participatory democratic environments inherently provide a nurturing ground for civil society, enabling it to flourish, advocate for societal changes, and execute its watchdog role more effectively. This hypothesis aligns with the theoretical expectation that participatory democracy not only empowers citizens but also engenders a conducive atmosphere for civil society's operations, advocacy, and government accountability.

H1 : Higher levels of participatory democracy in Southeast Asia are associated with greater robustness of civil society.

Civil liberty, the second independent variable, plays a crucial role in determining the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia. Civil liberty, defined as the protections and freedoms guaranteed to individuals, particularly regarding expressions, assembly, association, and the press, is fundamental to civil society's capacity to function and thrive. The significance of these liberties is highlighted in civil society's ability to engage in advocacy, dialogue, and collective actions, which are essential for democratic participation and accountability (Sidel, 2011). The extent to which civil liberty is upheld or restricted within a country directly influences the operational environment of civil society, impacting its ability to contribute effectively to governance and societal well-being. In Southeast Asia, where political regimes and the degree of civil liberty vary widely, the relationship between civil liberty and civil society's robustness becomes particularly pronounced (Gerard, 2014). The research posits that countries with higher levels of civil liberty are likely to exhibit stronger and more dynamic civil societies as the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association are critical for civic engagement and the pursuit of collective interests.

H2 : Higher levels of civil liberty in Southeast Asia are associated with greater robustness of civil society.

Political stability, as the third independent variable, significantly influences civil society's robustness and operational capacity. Political stability is defined as the government's resilience against unconstitutional or violent threats, including domestic unrest and terrorism, and is crucial for civil society's functionality (Kaufmann & Kray, 2023). Stable governance provides a predictable environment conducive to CSOs, enabling them to plan and execute their activities effectively. Conversely, political instability may preoccupy governments with internal conflicts, diverting attention and resources away from fostering a supportive atmosphere for civil society. Thus, political stability is essential not only for the mere existence but also for the flourishing of civil society, allowing it to pursue its objectives without the looming threat of governmental upheaval. This variable is operationalized through a composite measure incorporating indicators that measure perceptions of the likelihood that the government in power will be destabilized or overthrown. It is imperative to distinguish political stability from a country's level of democracy, as a stable regime, regardless of its democratic credentials, may offer conditions more favorable to civil society than an unstable democratic setup. In addition, empirical evidence is provided, underscoring the complex relationship between political stability and civil society freedom, illustrating how stable political environments can enhance civil society's capacity to contribute to social cohesion, governance, and peacebuilding, irrespective of the regime type (Ziegler, 2010; Kaiser, 2020). This distinction clarifies that political stability, distinct from the level of democracy, influences civil society's freedom to operate and pursue its agendas.

H3 : The less likely the government is in Southeast Asian countries to be destabilized, the more robust its civil society will be.

The rule of law, as the fourth independent variable, is pivotal in establishing a just and equitable environment where civil society can flourish. It encompasses the principles of legality, fairness, and protection of rights, ensuring that laws are applied impartially and

consistently. This variable is operationalized through a composite measure incorporating indicators like rigorous and impartial public administration, transparent laws with predictable enforcement, and citizen access to justice, reflecting the legal system's fairness, predictability, and accountability (Pemstein et al., 2022). These aspects are crucial for maintaining a legal environment conducive to civil society activities. However, according to Curley (2018), in Cambodia, legislation like the NGO Law, ostensibly aligned with the rule of law, has been used to constrict civil society under the guise of legality. This situation points to a complex relationship where the rule of law is instrumental for civil society's freedom, yet its manipulation can serve to undermine civil society's autonomy and effectiveness.

H4 : Stronger adherence to the rule of law in Southeast Asian countries is positively associated with the robustness of civil society.

Neopatrimonialism, as the fifth independent variable, encapsulates governance where personalistic authority infiltrates formal institutional frameworks, blending clientelistic politics, dominant executive powers, and political use of state resources for legitimacy. In contexts where neopatrimonialism prevails, CSOs may face challenges in maintaining independence and navigating a political landscape marked by favoritism and patronage (Clapham, 1985). Reflecting on studies of Clapham (1985) and Bratton and Van de Walle (1997), the research posits that higher levels of neopatrimonialism, characterized by clientelism, presidentialism, and regime corruption, affect civil society's robustness in Southeast Asia. This hypothesis acknowledges the complexities introduced by neopatrimonial practices on civil society's ability to operate effectively within the democratic process.

H5 : Higher levels of neopatrimonialism in Southeast Asian countries are negatively associated with the robustness of civil society.

Additionally, GDP per capita and control of corruption serve as essential control variables in understanding civil society's robustness. GDP per capita is a crucial economic indicator that reflects the average economic output per person and can influence the resources available for civil society's activities (Callen, 2024; World Bank, 2023). Higher GDP per capita often correlates with better societal well-being, potentially fostering a more vibrant civil society. Control of corruption, on the other hand, measures the prevalence of corruption within public sectors and its impact on society, including "grand corruption" and "state capture" (Kaufmann & Kray, 2023). A lower perception of corruption is indicative of stronger institutional integrity, which can provide a more conducive environment for civil society's growth and effectiveness.

Freedom of expression and digital freedom accessibility are critical for the operational freedom and influence of civil society. Freedom of expression encompasses the rights to free speech, media freedom, and open political discourse, which are fundamental for civil society's engagement in advocacy and policy influence (Pemstein et al., 2022). Higher freedom of expression is often associated with increased civil society's dynamism, empowerment, and participation in the democratic process, facilitating a more informed, active, and resilient public sphere. Digital freedom accessibility, a composite index created for the research,

averages indicators related to the Internet and social media freedoms (Mechkova et al., 2019). Higher values in this index represent greater digital freedom, essential for civil society's adaptability and reach in the digital age, allowing for broader engagement and mobilization across societal and political landscapes.

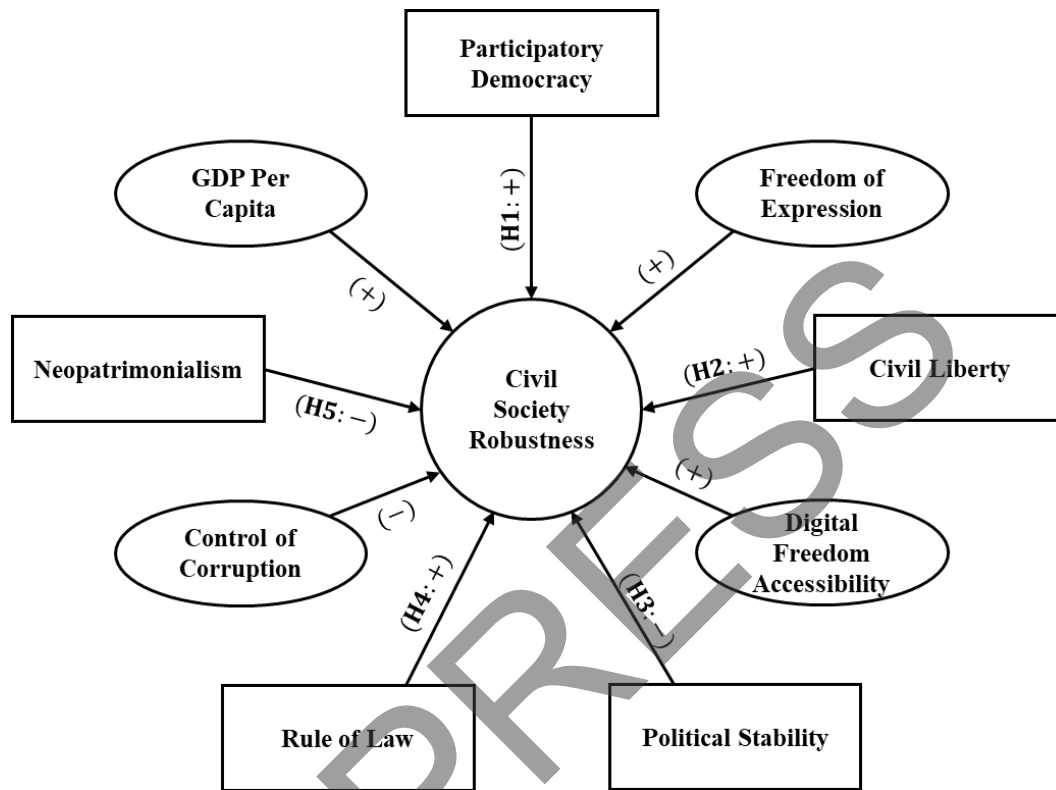


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework Diagram

Integrating the theoretical insights into the Southeast Asian context reveals that while these theories offer a comprehensive understanding of civil society's dynamics. Their applicability varies across the region's diverse political and cultural landscapes. Southeast Asia's unique blend of political systems, historical legacies, and social norms necessitates a proper application of these theories, acknowledging the potential limitations and regional specificities that might influence theoretical assumptions. This diversity underscores the importance of adapting theoretical models to reflect the realities of civil society in Southeast Asia, where the interplay between civil liberty, political stability, and socioeconomic factors shapes the operational environment for civil society organizations.

In summary, this theoretical framework (see Figure 1) establishes a foundation for investigating the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia, proposing hypotheses that elucidate the relationships between participatory democracy, civil liberty, political stability, rule of law, neopatrimonialism, and civil society's robustness. The inclusion of control

variables like GDP per capita, control of corruption, freedom of expression, and digital freedom accessibility further refines the analysis. This comprehensive approach not only highlights the multifaceted role of civil society in the region but also guides the research methodology and subsequent analysis, aiming to contribute valuable insights into the conditions under which civil society can thrive in Southeast Asia.

## Research Methodology

The research adopts an explanatory research design, utilizing quantitative methods through statistical analysis to explore the dynamics and determinants of civil society robustness in Southeast Asia. The justification for this methodology stems from the objective to empirically assess the impact of participatory democracy, civil liberty, political stability, rule of law, and neopatrimonialism alongside control variables like GDP per capita, control of corruption, freedom of expression, and digital freedom accessibility on civil society's robustness. By employing a quantitative approach, the research aims to uncover patterns and relationships within data that qualitative methods may not reveal, facilitating a broader understanding of the factors contributing to civil society's robustness.

The research strategy is operationalized through the analysis of a comprehensive dataset spanning from 1986 to 2023, a period marked by significant political transitions in Southeast Asia that saw shifts from authoritarian regimes to more democratic forms of governance. The choice of 1986 as the starting point is deliberate, aligning with the onset of the third wave of democratization in the Philippines. This event catalyzed similar transformations across the region. This period's significance lies in its witness to the burgeoning of democracy and the rise of social movements, presenting a rich backdrop for examining civil society's evolution. Data for the research are derived from secondary datasets provided by the V-Dem and the World Bank, renowned for their comprehensive and reliable metrics on political, social, and economic indicators globally.

The operationalization of the dependent variable, civil society robustness, utilizes the CCSI. This index, with an interval scale from 0 (low robustness) to 1 (high robustness), is a composite measure reflecting the autonomy of civil society from the state and the degree to which citizens can freely and actively pursue political and civic goals. Based on Bayesian factor analysis, it is aggregated from various indicators, including CSOs' entry and exit, CSOs' repression, and CSOs' participatory environment (Bernhard et al., 2017; Pemstein et al., 2022).

Next, the operationalization of independent variables in the research involves comprehensive and quantitatively driven approaches. For participatory democracy, the research utilizes an interval scale from 0 to 1, embracing a broad perspective on citizen's involvement in both electoral and non-electoral political processes. This variable is measured through indicators of direct democracy engagement, involvement in civil society organizations, and subnational electoral participation, also factoring in the level of electoral democracy (Coppedge et al., 2015). Civil liberty is similarly quantified on an interval scale

from 0 to 1, encapsulating the extent of individual freedoms from government constraints and violence. The measurement aggregates indices of physical violence and political and private civil liberties, reflecting the comprehensive scope of liberal freedoms in society. Political stability integrates perceptions regarding government stability and its vulnerability to unconstitutional changes, reversed scaled from 0 (stable) to 1 (unstable). It employs data normalization processes, including interpolation using K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) and trend extrapolation for missing values. This variable addresses the complex dynamics between civil society's operational freedom and governmental durability. Rule of law examines the fairness and impartiality of law enforcement and governance, also on a 0 to 1 scale. This index is constructed from various indicators reflecting judicial independence, transparency, and accountability within the legal system (Pemstein et al., 2022). Lastly, neopatrimonialism is assessed through a scale reflecting the degree of personalistic authority, clientelism, and political corruption, indicating a governance structure's divergence from democratic norms.

Finally, the operationalization of control variables in the research includes economic, political, and informational factors. GDP per capita is represented as continuous data (logged for analysis) from the World Bank to indicate economic output per person, affecting civil society's resources. Control of corruption uses normalized interval data from 0 to 1 to reflect perceptions of public power misuse, applying KNN interpolation and trend extrapolation for missing data. The freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index aggregates media and speech freedom variables on a 0 to 1 scale using the V-Dem dataset. The Digital Freedom Accessibility Index (DEFI) averages the measures of government Internet and social media restrictions on a similar scale, also based on V-Dem data.

The research also employs beta regression models to examine the relationship between various independent variables and the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia as the dependent variable. Beta regression is particularly suited for data bounded between 0 and 1, such as the measures of civil society robustness used in this analysis (Cribari-Neto & Zeileis, 2010; Ferrari & Cribari-Neto, 2004). This approach naturally accommodates the proportional nature of the dependent variable, incorporates features such as heteroskedasticity and skewness, and allows the modeling of variables that assume values in the standard unit interval.

To estimate the parameters of the beta regression model, the researcher utilizes Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE). MLE aims to find the parameter values that maximize the likelihood of observing the data given in the model. The beta regression model specifies the mean of the dependent variable as a function of independent variables through a link function. Specifically, the expected value  $E(y|x)$  is related to the independent variables  $x$  through a linear combination as follows.

$$g(E(y|x)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1x_1 + \dots + \beta_nx_n$$

It shows  $g$  as a link function (such as the logit or probit function),  $\beta_0, \beta_1, \dots, \beta_n$  as the coefficients estimated by  $MLE$ , and  $x_1, \dots, x_n$  as the independent variables. This modeling approach, by employing numerical optimization techniques such as the Newton-Raphson algorithm, efficiently addresses the complexities associated with data in the unit interval, including heteroskedasticity and potential skewness (McCullagh & Nelder, 1989).

## Result and Discussion

The analysis undertaken in the research employs a beta regression model to evaluate the determinants of civil society robustness in Southeast Asia. As revealed in Table 1, with an  $R^2$  of 0.952, the model demonstrates an exceptional fit, signifying that the variables selected for the research substantially explain the variation in civil society's robustness across the region. The high log-likelihood value of 563.961, based on 340 observations, further attests to the model's efficacy in capturing the complex interplay between civil society robustness and its predictors.

The positive and statistically significant coefficient for participatory democracy (3.524,  $p < 0.01$ ) strongly suggests that higher levels of participatory democracy are associated with greater robustness of civil society. This finding underscores the importance of active citizen engagement and the inclusion of diverse voices in the democratic process. It corroborates the theoretical perspective that a participatory democracy framework, where citizens are actively involved in decision-making processes beyond electoral participation, serves as a critical foundation for a dynamic and resilient civil society.

Similarly, civil liberty emerges as a crucial determinant of civil society's robustness, with a coefficient of 2.688 ( $p < 0.01$ ). This significant positive impact highlights the essential role of freedoms concerning expression, assembly, and the press in fostering an environment where civil society can thrive. It aligns with the expectation that civil liberty provides the space for CSOs to operate effectively, advocate for social justice, and contribute to the broader democratic governance ecosystem.

The coefficient for political stability, at -0.426 ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicates a significant association with civil society's robustness. The negative coefficient implies that greater political instability correlates with decreased civil society robustness. This result suggests that political instability within a government may actually hinder the effectiveness and resilience of CSOs. Stable governance appears to be a key factor for civil society, providing the predictable and secure environment that is necessary for these organizations to flourish and sustain their advocacy and engagement efforts.

The coefficient for the rule of law, though negative (-0.376), is not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating a complex relationship that does not straightforwardly affect civil society robustness. This outcome may reflect the varying quality of governance and legal enforcement across Southeast Asia, where the theoretical support of the rule of law for civil society's functions may be undermined by inconsistent application or challenges in legal frameworks.

Interestingly, neopatrimonialism shows a positive significant influence on civil society robustness (0.892,  $p < 0.05$ ). This finding suggests that in environments where state-society relations are characterized by neopatrimonial practices, CSOs may still find avenues to assert their influence and maintain their robustness. This result contributes to understanding how civil society navigates and adapts to different governance contexts.

Table 1 Beta Regression Results for Robustness of Civil Society in Southeast Asia

<b>Beta Regression Results for Robustness of Civil Society</b>	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Robustness of Civil Society
Participatory Democracy	3.524*** (0.346)
Civil Liberty	2.688*** (0.219)
Political Stability	-0.426** (0.173)
Rule of Law	-0.376 (0.420)
Neopatrimonialism	0.892** (0.406)
GDP Per Capita	0.139*** (0.033)
Control of Corruption	-0.187 (0.252)
Freedom of Expression	2.202*** (0.134)
Digital Freedom Accessibility	0.416 (0.353)
Constant	-4.550*** (0.517)
Observations	340
R <sup>2</sup>	0.952
Log Likelihood	563.961
<i>Note:</i>	* $p < 0.1$ ; ** $p < 0.05$ ; *** $p < 0.01$

The positive effect of GDP per capita (0.139,  $p < 0.01$ ) underscores the link between economic development and civil society robustness, suggesting that wealthier nations provide a more fertile ground for civil society activities. Conversely, the control of corruption's non-significant negative coefficient (-0.187,  $p > 0.05$ ) hints at the complex dynamics where



corruption prevalence may not directly correlate with civil society vitality, possibly due to the multifaceted nature of corruption and its impact on societal structures.

Freedom of expression stands out as a significant predictor of civil society robustness (2.202,  $p < 0.01$ ), highlighting its fundamental role in enabling civil society's activities. The finding emphasizes the importance of safeguarding expressive freedoms to ensure civil society's ability to advocate, mobilize, and engage in public discourse. Meanwhile, the non-significant coefficient for digital freedom accessibility (0.416,  $p > 0.05$ ) suggests that while digital platforms are increasingly relevant for civil society, their impact on robustness may vary, reflecting the digital divide and differing levels of digital literacy across the region.

The research findings affirm the pivotal roles of participatory democracy, civil liberty, and political stability in enhancing the robustness of civil society within Southeast Asia, echoing the extensive discourse on democratic governance as crucial to social cohesion and public accountability (Hansson & Weiss, 2023; Edwards, 2019). Active engagement of citizens and the safeguarding of individual freedoms are foundational to a dynamic civil society, which, in turn, substantiates the theory that participatory democracy and civil liberties significantly contribute to civil society's effectiveness. These results underscore the importance of inclusive political processes that facilitate diverse societal voices, thereby promoting democratic depth and resilience.

Political stability emerges as another critical factor, supporting the notion that a predictable and stable governance environment is indispensable for the efficacy of civil society's operations (Case, 2002; Hansson & Weiss, 2023). The findings illustrate how political predictability allows civil organizations to plan better and execute their agendas, enhancing their ability to contribute to societal development and democratic governance without the interruption of political turmoil. This stability not only fosters civil society growth but also strengthens its capacity to advocate for democratic norms and social justice.

Contrary to established assumptions within theoretical literature, the positive impact of neopatrimonialism on civil society's robustness introduces an intriguing perspective to the discourse (Goh, 2015). This result suggests that civil societies in Southeast Asia may possess unique adaptive capabilities that enable them to operate effectively and exert influence even within political systems marked by personalized power dynamics. The implication that civil societies are active agents capable of navigating and leveraging such governance structures for their advantage challenges conventional views. It indicates a more complex interplay between civil society and political systems.

Moreover, the relationship between economic development, as indicated by GDP per capita and civil society's vitality, is significantly positive, aligning with modernization theories that suggest a well-resourced society provides a fertile ground for civil society's activities (Lipset, 1994). This relationship prompts a broader discussion about the economic determinants of civil society's robustness, proposing that economic health directly influences the operational capacity and effectiveness of civil societies. It invites future research to explore how variations in economic conditions across the region may affect the strategic approaches of CSOs.

The analysis presented robustly confirms the hypotheses that participatory democracy and civil liberty significantly enhance the robustness of civil society in Southeast Asia, as proposed in the theoretical framework. The positive and statistically significant coefficients for participatory democracy and civil liberty not only corroborate the data but also strengthen the arguments laid out by scholars like Coppedge et al. (2015) and Sidel (2011), discussing the impact of democratic engagement and freedoms on civil society efficacy. These findings affirm that a greater emphasis on democratic participation and civil liberties can directly lead to a more robust civil society since these elements encourage a more active and engaged citizenry capable of advocating for change and influencing policy.

Furthermore, the analysis sheds light on the significant role of political stability in civil society's robustness. The negative coefficient for political instability aligns with the hypothesis that political stability supports civil society effectiveness by providing a predictable environment that is free from unrest and governmental upheaval (Kaufmann & Kray, 2023; Ziegler, 2010). The data support the assertion that stable political conditions allow civil organizations to operate without the fear of sudden disruptive changes, fostering an atmosphere conducive to sustained civil engagement and robust operation of civil societies.

The theoretical implications of these findings are profound. They suggest that the traditional models of civil society, which often emphasize the adversarial role of civil organizations in challenging state power, may need to be revised to incorporate the cooperative dynamics observed in contexts of stable governance and active democratic participation. These insights contribute to understanding civil society in Southeast Asia, highlighting the interdependence between civil society's robustness and democratic structures. On the other hand, this understanding also challenges the traditional dichotomy of state versus civil society, proposing a model where robust civil societies emerge from synergistic relationships with democratic institutions and stable political environments.

On a practical level, the findings have significant implications for policymakers and civil society organizations. They underline the necessity of fostering environments that enhance participatory democracy and civil liberties, which are shown to be fundamental for the vitality and effectiveness of civil society. For instance, policies aimed at enhancing public participation in governance and protecting freedoms can lead to stronger civil societies which are capable of contributing more effectively to democratic governance and social development. Additionally, understanding the positive role of political stability in civil society's robustness suggests that efforts to maintain or achieve political stability should be seen as integral to strengthening civil society.

Finally, although counterintuitively, the surprising positive correlation between neopatrimonialism and civil society's robustness opens new avenues for research and strategy. This finding invites policymakers and civil society's leaders to consider how civil societies may leverage existing political structures, even those characterized by personalized power dynamics, to their advantage. It also calls for a deeper exploration into the adaptive strategies employed by civil societies in such governance environments, which can lead to innovative approaches to advocacy and engagement under various political regimes.

## Conclusion

The research makes a significant contribution to the discourse on civil society's influence and interaction with the democratization process within the diverse context of Southeast Asia. It systematically examines the relationships between participatory democracy, civil liberty, political stability, neopatrimonialism, rule of law, and robustness of civil society, drawing on extensive quantitative analysis. The research confirms the hypotheses that participatory democracy and civil liberty are positively associated with civil society robustness, reinforcing the critical role these factors play in fostering a conducive environment for civil engagement and advocacy. Political stability further underscores the conventional views, highlighting the indispensable role of a stable and predictable governance environment for the effectiveness and growth of civil society. The analysis also reveals that the relationship between the rule of law and civil society's robustness is not statistically significant, indicating a more complex or possibly context-dependent interaction that does not straightforwardly affect civil society's robustness as previously theorized. Surprisingly, the positive impact of neopatrimonialism on civil society's robustness offers a novel perspective, challenging conventional wisdom and suggesting a complex adaptive relationship between civil society organizations and governance structures characterized by personalized power.

These findings are particularly relevant given the region's vast political, economic, and cultural diversity. They underscore the necessity for tailored strategies that recognize the unique challenges and opportunities presented by each country's context. For policymakers and CSOs, it implies the development of policies and practices that support democratic engagement, protect freedoms, and foster stability. Specifically, strategies to enhance participatory democracy may include promoting civic education and facilitating greater public involvement in policy-making processes. Safeguarding civil liberty may involve legislative reforms to ensure freedom of expression and assembly while adapting to neopatrimonialism can require CSOs to develop more flexible approaches to advocacy and service delivery.

Reflecting on the methodological approach, the research's reliance on secondary data sources, while a limitation, also highlights the utility of existing datasets in uncovering broad trends and patterns across the region. Future research can build on these findings through primary data collection, qualitative methodologies, or comparative studies with other regions to deepen understanding of the variables affecting civil society's robustness. Moreover, the unexpected findings related to neopatrimonialism invite theoretical reflection. They suggest that existing frameworks may need to be expanded or revised to more accurately capture the dynamics of civil society in contexts where governance structures blend formal institutions with personalistic networks. Therefore, the research not only fills a gap in the empirical landscape but also challenges and extends theoretical models of civil society's role in democratization.

In the context of ongoing debates on the dynamics of democratization, the research findings illuminate the complex interplay between civil society and democratic governance. The positive association between participatory democracy, civil liberty, and civil society's

robustness aligns with democratic theories that advocate for enhanced citizen participation and freedoms as foundational to strong democratic institutions. Conversely, the unexpected positive impact of neopatrimonialism on civil society's robustness challenges the typically negative connotations associated with such governance systems in the literature, suggesting that in certain contexts, these systems may foster more rather than hinder the development of robust civil societies.

These insights contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how diverse governance frameworks can variably impact civil society effectiveness. It underscores the importance of contextualized strategies for civil society's strength, tailored to the specific political and cultural realities of Southeast Asia. It also suggests a broader implication for the global discourse on democratization that the pathways to robust civil society are not uniform, and the models of democracy may need to be adapted to reflect local governance structures and historical legacies.

Furthermore, for the research limitation, the research excludes Brunei Darussalam and Timor-Leste due to unavailable data and limited data availability, respectively. While the exclusion of these countries narrows the scope of the analysis, it ensures the robustness and reliability of the findings across the remaining Southeast Asian countries. Additionally, despite the strengths of beta regression in handling data within the unit interval, potential biases and limitations inherent in the secondary datasets used must be acknowledged. Such limitations include the reliance on externally sourced indicators for participatory democracy, civil liberty, and other variables, which may not fully capture the nuances of civil society's robustness. The data manipulation and normalization methods also may pose additional bias for the analysis. Moreover, the interpretation of the regression coefficients requires careful consideration because it pertains to the mean of the transformed variable rather than the original scale of measurement.

Future inquiries may focus on exploring how these findings relate to other regions with similar political landscapes, potentially broadening the scope of these insights into global contexts. It can help to refine theories of civil society and democracy, ensuring they are inclusive of the varied ways in which civil society can contribute to democratic processes across different political regimes. Moreover, the research's insights into the role of political stability and the rule of law – or the lack thereof – in influencing civil society's robustness offer a fertile ground for policy discussions aiming at enhancing the efficacy of democratic governance worldwide.

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