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CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
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Regionalism and Alternatives for the LGBTQ+

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Queering Solidarity

Civil Society at the Fringes of ASEAN Regionalism and Alternatives for the LGBTQ+¹

Ananeza Aban² and Jose Monfred C. Sy³

ABSTRACT ■ The neoliberal politics governing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) diplomacy has pushed this intergovernmental body to further close its doors from civil society. This deficit of political will to engage substantially with civil society puts the member states' credibility into question as they proclaim to work for a people-oriented and people-centered regionalism.

¹ This paper is an expanded version of the panel discussion during the teleconference "Queering ASEAN Regionalism: Online Learning Sessions on Alternative Regionalism as a Strategy to Advance LGBTIQ Human Rights in Southeast Asia" by the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus. During the panel discussion, Ms. Aban talked about critical perspectives on the dichotomy between ASEAN and civil society, while Mr. Sy focused on the limits of human rights and identity as vertices of LGBTQ+ activism in the region, emphasizing on the role of solidarity in forging a regionalism that caters to the queer experience. Accounts from the participation and advocacy of civil society organizations at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum (ACSC/APF) 2019 held in Thailand, where both Ms. Aban and Mr. Sy represented the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), are incorporated in this paper as part of the discussion on criticisms lobbied against the ASEAN.

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons not falling into the categorical matrix of capitalist social reproduction—that of the heterosexual family—continue to face discrimination, harassment, and even death under the ineptness and toothless responses of Southeast Asian governments and the ASEAN as an intergovernmental body. Marginalized sectors such as workers, farmers, indigenous peoples, and women share similar and differing plights. The current situation, thus, deserves a rethinking at the onset of this already shrinking democratic space for civil society.

This discussion paper champions the possibility of an alternative regional integration that emerges from the collective efforts of diverse Southeast Asian peoples and formations against the hegemonic development paradigm, which has left the LGBTQ+ far behind. In lobbying a critique of ASEAN's heteropatriarchal neoliberal framework, the researchers suggest that solidarity with other sectors must be and is becoming central to LGBTQ+ and SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics)-based advocacy in Southeast Asia. Framing this reflection in Marxist and radical political economic queer theories that link neoliberalism and homophobia, this paper critiques the ASEAN and its toothless human rights mechanism for prioritizing profitmaking rather than the peoples' concerns, of which the researchers figure the LGBTQ+ experience as part of. This paper also casts doubt on adopting a human rights discourse as the sole mechanism for LGBTQ+ and SOGIESC-based advocacy. Thus, this paper closes by showcasing three cases of alternative practices that contribute to realizing a regional integration in Southeast Asia that emphasizes civil society and includes and celebrates the LGBTQ+.

KEYWORDS ■ alternatives, ASEAN, civil society, LGBTQ+, queer, alternative regionalism



Introduction

Earlier this year, Mira, a 42-year-old transgender woman, was burned to death in Jakarta, Indonesia. Decades after pivotal lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) activism, which

includes the mainstreaming of such socio-political-cultural identity, a transwoman was—under broad daylight—set on fire by a group of men. The violence purportedly took place in Cilincing after the suspects accused Mira of stealing a truck driver’s phone and wallet (Fachriansyah 2020). Despite charges of aggravated assault, courts dismissed the case. Mira’s legal advocacy—composing of members of several rights groups—condemned this physical, and later, legal violence, calling the spade a spade—*transphobia*.

This is not the only case of socio-cultural denial, discrimination, harassment, and violence inflicted on persons on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC). In 2014, Filipina Jennifer Laude was brutally murdered by 19-year-old Private First Class Joseph Scott Pemberton, who had been unaware that Laude was a transgender woman, under the auspices of the Visiting Forces Agreement between the Philippines and the United States (US). In 2018, a 32-year old transgender woman was beaten to death by youths aged 16 to 21 in Klang, a district outside Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, upon the premise of mobile phone theft. Perpetrators of these human rights violations, among a multitude of others, always come with an excuse ready to defend prejudice rooted in deep-seated beliefs and sustained by “traditions” and “norms” in Southeast Asia as elsewhere.

More inexcusable are the inept and toothless responses made by Southeast Asian governments and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) against these crimes. LGBTQ+ communities in the region enjoy only a mouse’s share of state resources due to their absence in domestic and regional policies, allowing for a vulnerability in humanitarian security. Often, religious beliefs have been invoked as grounds to deny people of diverse SOGIESC fundamental freedoms, such as the rights to free expression, political association, family, health, and the like. Disavowal from gender stereotypes and sexual norms are always met with harsh criticism and religious intolerance. Cultural identities and histories have also been used in the region to deny the existence of the LGBTQ+.

Despite this Sisyphean challenge, pride groups—so named for their celebration and affirmation of dignity, equality, and increased visibility

of LGBTQ+ persons—in the region emerge from inspired LGBTQ+ individuals to lobby for human rights that must be configured in discourse and law to serve queer populations. These groups, whether loose or formal, inspire support from civil society organizations (CSOs) and peoples' organizations (POs) from the grassroots level to the regional. Whereas there is hardly engagement from ASEAN leaders, the regional networks blossoming especially in the last two decades from cross-national campaigns among SOGIESC-based organizations prepare a fertile ground where advocacy that cuts across identity markers can be cultivated.

This discussion paper reflects on this possibility by championing the concept and praxis of an alternative regional integration that burst out of the collective efforts of scattered Southeast Asian peoples and formations in challenging the hegemonic development paradigm, that which leaves the LGBTQ+ far behind. In lobbying a critique of ASEAN's neoliberal framework and its concomitant heteropatriarchal superstructure, this paper suggests that solidarity with other sectors must be and is becoming central to LGBTQ+ and SOGIESC-based advocacy in Southeast Asia. Framing this reflection in Marxist and other radical political economic queer perspectives that link neoliberalism and homophobia, this paper critiques the ASEAN and its toothless human rights mechanism for prioritizing policy on profitmaking—which benefits circles of elite men who compose governments—rather than the peoples' concerns, of which the LGBTQ+ experience is part of. This paper also casts doubt on adopting a human rights discourse—indeed a Western liberal invention—as the *sole* mechanism for LGBTQ+ and SOGIESC-based advocacy. Concretely put, human rights mechanisms of the ASEAN are limited by virtue of their very alignment with the ASEAN as an intergovernmental body. This paper champions an activism founded on and emerging from solidarity among marginalized sectors. Thus, it closes by showcasing three cases of alternatives that propose novel political, social, and cultural practices. In documenting these criticisms and alternatives, we envision the continued movement toward a regional integration in Southeast Asia that emphasizes civil society and includes and celebrates the LGBTQ+.

Queerness as an international phenomenon

Uncloseting the queer

A now multifarious term, queerness has been articulated by activists, scholars, and policymakers to encompass defiance, celebration, and the refusal of limitations. Pioneering queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (1993, 8) understands the word as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.” Queerness embodies an invasion, an unsettling of fictional categories, such as binarized sexes and genders, that have been frozen in history through exercises of hegemonic power as those of states or regional bodies. This paper crafts a critique and proposal through a lens that recognizes the link between internationalization (or regionalization) and queer experiences.

It was in 1978 that the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) was established, launching the queer affair into internationalization. First acting as a disparate affiliation among national groups, ILGA adopted a human rights approach to their battle, undergoing institutionalization and creating regional groups across the seven continents (Kollman and Waites 2009, 4). LGBTQ+ liberation movements followed this trend worldwide. The internationalization of the struggle is not without its victories. Only in the last decade, two high-profile documents, the Declaration of Montreal (emanating from the International Conference on LGBT Human Rights in 2006) and the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (Corrêa and Muntarbhorn 2007) were drafted and signed by global LGBTQ+ activists and other non-state actors, symbolizing an “acceleration and intensification of international struggles by [LGBTQ+] movements” (Kollman and Waites 2009, 1). These agreements explicitly acknowledge that “the human rights of LGBT people [are] part of our comprehensive human rights policy” (Clinton 2011, quoted in Weber 2016, 18). Internationalization is a lynchpin in the history of the queer liberation and rights movement across the world.

This short history is underpinned by that fact that the international queer movement emerged and became part of the feminist movement. Queer international theory, in turn, enhances feminist international theory by virtue of its unsettling of categories that may be taken as essential by some standpoint feminists. Collaborations among feminist and queer activists and theorists have won victories across time. However, and unfortunately, some rifts remain (Jackson 1998, 68–69). The enemy that must be fought is the hierarchy itself, in which male dominance is sustained in part through the heterosexual contract, which oppresses all participants in these debates of little purchase. Queer-centric analysis thus “primarily investigate[s] how queer subjectivities and queer practices—the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ that cannot or will not be made to signify monolithically in relation to gender, sex, and/or sexuality—are disciplined, normalized, or capitalized upon by and for states, NGOs, and international corporations” (Weber 2014, 597). Ontologically, queerness emphasizes categories that do not signify monolithically. Epistemologically, it believes that knowledge is bound up by power. Its methodologies do not seek to unearth the truth. Rather, they emphasize alternative logics such as that of Roland Barthes’ *and/or*, where queer complexly embodies both and either categories of sex, gender, and identity (ibid., 597–98).

Coming out in a neoliberal world

Profit, as will be pointed out in this paper, trumps human struggles and experiences including queer lives. Interestingly, it has been assumed by some that the freedom of the market and the feminization of labor outside the factory and the eight-hour workday under late, multinational capitalism paved the way for the frustration of the nuclear family and thus, queer liberation. However, as John D’Emilio (1993, 474) sharply explains,

on the one hand, capitalism continually weakens the material foundation of family life, making it possible for individuals to live outside the family, and for a lesbian and gay male identity to develop. On the other, it needs to push men and women into families, at least long enough to reproduce the next generation of workers. The elevation of the family to ideological preeminence guarantees that capitalist society

will reproduce not just children, but heterosexism and homophobia.

Capital accumulation continues to threaten lives, including that of the LGBTQ+, given its dependence on gendered labor production and social reproduction. LGBTQ+ rights such as same-sex marriage may be celebrated in developed countries, but only insofar as a pool of heteronormatively gendered labor is available in a peripheral nation, such as Cambodia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia. This phenomenon occurs under the auspices of neoliberalism. In this late 20th-century conception that adopts a process of creative destruction, institutions, firms, medium- to small-scale industries, cooperatives, and communities across the world must perish so that those of superpower countries may thrive vigorously and weather the spasmodic crises of capital failure (Schumpeter 2003, 90; Harvey 1976; Wood 2005). It spells the invasion even of sexual life. Neoliberalism on a global scale, Peter Drucker (2018) explains, bolsters the role of the market which intensifies the growth of the casualization of wage labor and the informal sector in the developing world. He further argued that attached to this phenomenon is the whole exclusion package of transgender people from most sectors of formal employment. Having been pushed to the wall, queer communities must therefore double their hard work to meet their basic necessities.

Seeing heteronormativity as a cultural backdrop in the pursuit of neoliberalism, Drucker further stressed that the sexual dimension of neoliberal globalization never acquired much explicit attention in official development policy that generally positions the heterosexual or nuclear family (husband, wife, and children) both as a provider of and a beneficiary of market-based economic growth. This reality has only encouraged the underrepresentation or invisibility of the LGBTQ+ peoples because they do not fit into the normative gender and sexual categories in the dominant development narrative subsumed into the process of production and capital accumulation. Supporting this argument, Corrine Mason (2018) explained that the mainstream development policy primarily focuses on economy. However, whenever this policy turns its gaze into the private sphere, it only imagines the heterosexual, nuclear family as the linchpin of economic growth.

Discursive figurations of queerness, borne out of this economic and development framework, affect domestic and foreign policy until today. Feminists have volleyed critiques against international governance relations—including models of interstate-led regionalism, if we may add, interpreting its conventional strand to be obsessed with “power, autonomy, self-reliance, and rationality,” attributes that, under the influence of rational choice theory, are modeled on behaviors typically demonstrated by men more than by women and the LGBTQ+ (Tickner 2004, 44). Domestic policies in Putin’s Russia and Museveni’s Uganda that pathologize the queer as perverse through punishment were condemned by states such as Obama’s US that figured the LGBTQ+ as part of its foreign policy (Weber 2014, 597). Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has linked the sector’s rights to other country’s track record of democracy. Uganda is then pathologized as perverse, i.e. the rejected queer by the very virtue of its criminalization of same-sex relations (Lind 2014, 603). This pathologization is materialized in the threats of the US to cut foreign aid. Here, gay rights are normalized as an element of democracy, and other states which disregard these rights are seen as perverse, the position historically assumed by the LGBTQ+. The discipline’s governing dichotomy, order versus anarchy, is constituted and sustained by a renewed hetero/homo-normative vs. queer dichotomy (Weber 2014, 597). While the logic of Western progress and development has changed into normalizing the queer in what Amy Lind (2014, 603) calls “the new gay normal,” the binary between normal/perverse remains intact, and this is what solidarity seeks to unsettle, as will be explained in the essay. The infamous slogan of the US military “don’t ask, don’t tell,” which has been heavily criticized for being complicit in silencing and discriminating against gay and lesbian citizens, can be studied from both/either material—disciplinary practices, abuse, rules and regulations—and/or discursive—perceptions, figurations—emphases. Queer states that appear “gay friendly” seem to be simultaneously “promoting and opposing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and intersex liberation” (Lind 2014, 601).

Weber examines a figure in LGBTQ+ rights movements that has slowly been emerging since the Stonewall Riots of 1969: the “gay rights holder.” By mining insights from transnational and global queer studies, Weber asserts that the “new gay normal” figure espoused by

democrats in the US like Obama and Clinton in their propaganda signals that the *homonormal* has found place in Western discourses on human rights as a variation of the neoliberal subject whose citizenship relies on being reproductive in and for capitalism. Stevi Jackson (1998, 70) gives shape to this critique of the LGBTQ+ rights activism: “[Heteronormativity] is taken as the standard on which human rights are founded and hence the issue of rights is posed in terms of equality *with* heterosexuals.” This paper decisively follows these critiques by deviating from the unquestioned discourse of human rights believed to be directly oppositional to the masculinized episteme of the state.

But where are the peoples in ASEAN’s community?

For Southeast Asian civil society, the events that unfolded in 2017 in conjunction with the ASEAN were historical milestones, not only because the Philippines chaired the 50th anniversary celebration of the regional bloc. In the same year, peoples and civil society organizations, including LGBTQ+ formations, inaugurated an alternative process for a more robust regional integration that springs from the deeply-rooted struggles of communities in the region who are capable of building better societies out of their collective practices (and memories) that go beyond, if not contest, the ASEAN model of regionalism.

It must be pointed out that the ASEAN is a politically driven fiction. In August 1967, five foreign ministers organized a small meeting in Bangkok to discuss the political challenges of the times in what *they perceived* as Southeast Asia (ASEAN n.d.). Fifty years after, ASEAN with its 10-member states, flamboyantly announced its success of coming together as an intergovernmental organization in the developing world (ibid.). Believing in the contrary, Southeast Asian civil society made a collective stand to dispute ASEAN’s claims of progress, claiming that there has been no positive outcome nor historical milestone to celebrate as the exclusion of civil society and neglect of the peoples’ voices worsen. In fact, the 50th anniversary celebration found itself in an epoch of rising authoritarian regimes that suppress dissent and critique, championing business interests than public welfare, and shrinking political spaces for civil society and the grassroots to demand government accountability (ACSC/APF 2017).

From November 10 to 14, 2017, over a thousand grassroots, social movement activists, and other civil society groups from across Southeast Asia gathered in Metro Manila to hold a parallel conference to the 31st ASEAN Summit to raise issues and concerns that were silenced in the summit. Every year during its summit meetings, ASEAN peddles its promise and commitment for a people-oriented, people-centered community as embodied in the vision of “ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together.” Civil society groups in the region, however, are not convinced. Every year, there is also a show of force to ASEAN leaders of the capacity of civil society to mobilize and confront governments, and to bravely present their demands. At the same time, it regularly conveys a clear message that peoples in Southeast Asia can certainly organize and mobilize an alternative model of regionalism based on their own principles and commonalities. This is despite of the fifty long years of being pushed to the fringes of the ASEAN integration process.

The conference is annually organized by the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples’ Forum (ACSC/APF). On the last evening of this gathering in 2017, a throng of Southeast Asian peoples, some holding several *sulô* (torch) and placards, marched for two hours from Cubao to the historic People Power Monument, to the upbeat sound of the traditional Filipino *Ati-atihan* Festival that was played live by a local community percussion ensemble. It was an impressive show of solidarity among political formations and social movements to echo the peoples’ demands to ASEAN collectively, despite the risk it entails to many who might face arrest or detention if their respective governments would have received word of their participation. The most colorful delegation was the LGBTQ+ groups with their raised rainbow flags and re-designed Cambodian *kroma* (scarf) wrapped around their necks to represent the wide spectrum of sexuality, identity, and expression.

Annually, the ACSC/APF also prepares a litany of situational analyses of the region and evidence-based demands to ASEAN governments submitted to senior state officials. Disappointingly, the ASEAN has never addressed the contents of the ACSC/APF statements substantially. Notwithstanding the sincere efforts of civil society to initiate engagements for constructive dialogue, the ASEAN

remains largely out of reach to the people (*ibid.*). This has encouraged many ACSC/APF participants to re-evaluate civil society–ASEAN engagement.

In 2019, ASEAN only reiterated its two-faced attitude toward civil society in Bangkok, Thailand. During the 34th Summit, civil society’s call for ASEAN leaders to hold an interface with them failed to meet a consensus among governments and was therefore rejected. Dissatisfied, Thai CSO representatives condemned the ASEAN Summit as another episode of a ceremonial talk that dismissed discussion on human rights and democracy issues. This failure also exposed the “controlled partnership” preference of ASEAN, which only deals with the concerns of their self-appointed representatives and business groups (Auethavornpipat 2019; Boonlert and Mala 2019; Sutthichaya 2019). ASEAN’s refusal to discuss relevant peoples’ issues also reflected their compromise to Thailand’s military leadership and its suppression of activism, thereby dismissing the importance of a people-centered ASEAN (Auethavornpipat 2019). In September, on the eleventh hour, the Thai government, through its Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, displayed the same draconian severity by requiring ACSC/APF organizers to provide them a list of all the participants as a condition for their commitment to fund the massive civil society event. It was originally slated at a government-selected hotel in Pratunam, a tourist-packed area in the heart of Bangkok. However, the entire delegation opted not to give their names as an assertion of independence and autonomy as well as for the political security of participants. At once, CSOs decided to hold the assembly in a more conducive environment, the Rangsit Campus of the Thammasat University, without the support from the Thai government (Thai PBS World 2019). As a counter-strategy and propaganda, the Thai government organized its own “civil society conference” comprised mostly of Thai participants in the same hotel in Pratunam. Although ASEAN officials explained that “the door has not completely shut” for civil society, activists in the region see this as an empty promise (Auethavornpipat 2019). What transpired in Bangkok reflected the resolve of the Thai government to restrict rights of civil society to hold meetings independently. It strengthened the earlier impression of many activists of the vacillating tendencies of ASEAN toward civil society who are not part of their development equation. Nevertheless,

it became another moment for civil society to move forward outside the “ASEAN box” (ACSC/APF 2017).

The future of ASEAN and civil society dialogues

It must be noted that the latest CSO interface with ASEAN heads of state happened way back in 2015, during Malaysia’s chairship of ASEAN. However, the quality of the dialogue and the process it went through faced a barrage of criticisms. With the CSOs only given a few minutes to discuss their demands in front of the state leaders, the meeting was described as an act of tokenism (Tadem 2017), a ministerial gesture of ASEAN that looks pleasant for a photo opportunity. There was no meaningful discussion especially about human rights and human rights violations at the end of the meeting, disgruntling CSOs over the outcome. There were governments that did not recognize the autonomous selection process of the ACSC/APF, choosing their own CSO representative instead to the dialogue and thereby rousing some CSO representatives to boycott the interface. The ACSC/APF always stands firm in its position that in ASEAN meetings, it must not sacrifice autonomy, militancy, and rootedness to the people’s struggle.

In these tokenistic dialogues, LGBTQ+ activists get a share of discontent, too. When LGBTQ+ activist Ryan Silverio spoke to a panel of human rights defenders during the ACSC/APF 2015 in Malaysia, a Laotian diplomat among a set of reactors from the government repulsively remarked: “Why are we talking about LGBT issues here? ASEAN should be all about economics and trade. There’s no point talking about LGBT rights.” Right away, the Laotian diplomat earned the ire of participants in the audience. Issues of gender-based discrimination and the struggle for equality are excluded from ASEAN’s profit-oriented discourse, as will be discussed in a latter section.

This historical fiasco hinges on Gerard’s (2015) points: If ACSC/APF was indeed heard through the dialogues with ASEAN heads of state and other key officials, the outputs were not really translated into substantial policy outcomes by ASEAN governments. ASEAN’s

engagement with civil society organizations (CSOs) remains uneven, limited, and with no clear mechanisms for CSOs to participate and follow through. ASEAN prefers CSO participation in the area of functional utility that is usually depoliticized. And so it rather accommodates those who will support in achieving the already established goals and projects of its governing elite (Nesadurai 2012). Historically, the first interface between ASEAN and CSOs also happened in Malaysia in 2005, the year when the ACSC was also conceived. But after that event, Malaysia was criticized for not controlling the participation of CSOs whose legitimacy and mandate were questioned by Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Singapore (Chongkittavorn 2009, in Nesadurai 2012). Beginning in 2009, ASEAN officials decided to make this interface optional, instead of a permanent meeting during the ASEAN Summits (Nesadurai 2012). Through the years, ASEAN member states have consistently resisted and vacillated with regard to civil society interface or dialogues (Lopa 2016).

These episodes of failed engagements only reflect how peoples in Southeast Asia are always outside the policy circle of the ASEAN. If more than a decade ago, ASEAN left a door ajar for civil society to present their perspectives about how the ASEAN can be people-oriented (Collins 2008), that door could now be considered shut. Gerard (2015) further explained that these spaces for token engagement with CSOs were reflected in the ASEAN–CSO ad hoc consultations that were otherwise treated as informal dialogues with no guarantee to have impact on policy change. On the other hand, the GO–NGO (government and non-government) Forums that were formal gatherings were but tightly controlled by governments that excluded dissenting CSOs (*ibid.*). While relevant ASEAN bodies may have created an opportunity for CSOs’ critical views to be represented, these views were not advanced to shape political outcomes (*ibid.*).

These dialogues that took place under the purview of the ASEAN actually signified power relations that permeate the civil society space for participation. Cornwall (2002, 8) discussed that these spaces made available by those in power—in this sense, the hegemonic power of ASEAN—“may be discursively bounded to permit only limited citizen influence, colonizing interaction and stifling dissent.” Making it worse,

there are critical spaces for the exercise of citizenship and rights that are delegitimized by government and development institutions (*ibid.*, 22).

Although the ASEAN Charter, signed in 2007, contains critical elements such as democracy, human rights, good governance, and the rule of law (Nesadurai 2008), civil society called it a disappointment when their recommendations were not incorporated into this regional policy (Collins 2008). Rather, it institutionalized ASEAN's tradition of upholding the norms and principles of sovereignty/non-interference to maintain its internal cohesion (Nesadurai 2008). This top-down, state-centric persona of ASEAN that is apparent in the Charter, made no mention of institutionalized roles of CSOs and their space to provide input into the ASEAN decision-making process. Furthermore, "the apparatus (coordinating councils; community councils; sectoral ministerial bodies; committee of permanent representatives, national secretariats)" remains state-driven (Collins 2008, 326). It is therefore not surprising that the corresponding Blueprints of the ASEAN Community Pillars follow this same path.⁴

Interrogating the "ASEAN Way" and ASEAN's human rights mechanism

The dilemma of consensus and non-interference

The paradox behind the ASEAN-CSO interface resonates various levels about the "ASEAN Way" or a state-to-state conduct that is "governed by a set of informal, procedural norms emerged through repeated practice, consensus decision making, non-confrontational and deliberative style of interaction" (Nesadurai 2008, 228). The "ASEAN Way norms of sovereignty and non-interference and the ASEAN diplomacy of non-coercive, consultative and consensus-seeking interactions and decision-making" disallows this inter-

⁴ These Blueprints are for ASEAN's Economic, Socio-cultural, and Political Security Communities.

governmental body, governed and controlled by the members' political and bureaucratic elite, to openly discuss "sensitive issues with domestic political implications such as democratization, marginalization, exclusion, rights, social justice," which on the contrary, are central to the CSO discourse (Nesadurai 2012, 166). The ASEAN simply cannot abandon its notion of non-interference for the interest and welfare of everyone across the region. One of the main reasons is that the discourse on poverty and oppression will sensitively touch the members' domestic policy (Collins 2008).

Since the inception of this bloc, the rule of thumb is regional relations must not impinge on domestic affairs and politics of each member state. When national policy implies gross violations of peoples' rights, the ASEAN should not meddle. Collins (2017) explained that this consensus-based diplomacy is a glue that binds ASEAN members together. The ASEAN has to guarantee that no decision could be made against outright opposition, which enabled the elite to be at ease with one another. As a result, the ASEAN as a regional bloc has remained silent on many human rights issues and abuses. The promotion and protection of human rights, supposedly a core value of any regional organization that perceives peoples as central to its role, appears to be only good on paper.

Civil society's demands for ASEAN accountability substantially target these non-interference and consensus decision-making assertions that will otherwise entail a dramatic reorientation of ASEAN's reason for existence which "first and foremost is an Association for the elite" (Collins 2008, 315). The ACSC/APF argues that the ASEAN remains encumbered from fulfilling its vision because it has been in constant contradiction of itself as embodied in its interpretation of these norms or principles and act of diplomacy that limits its effectiveness in responding to peoples' agenda and regional challenges.

The LGBTQ+ sectors within the region have been constant victims of discrimination and the crackdown on human rights. Homophobia has stirred up hate crimes. But the ASEAN as a regional bloc refuses to intervene yet again because of its non-interference principle and discomforts in dealing with the issue. The regional LGBTQ+ rights group ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (ASC) explained that this inaction stems

from the putative belief that SOGIESC equality is alien to the region's local culture and is therefore not part of ASEAN values.

Various LGBTQ+ groups in the region recently mentioned that Southeast Asian states generally have a low rate of ratification of international human rights instruments (see **TABLE 1**). They also observed the insufficient support of these states to LGBTQ+ rights as reflected in the region's voting record regarding the establishment of the UN Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. Out of the eleven countries in the region, only Cambodia, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam voted in favor of the establishment (see **TABLE 2** on opposite page) (Destination Justice 2018).

TABLE 1 Southeast Asian states' ratification of relevant human rights instruments

Country	ICCPR	OP- ICCPR	OP2- ICCPR	ICESCR	OP- ICESCR	CEDAW	OP- CEDAW	CAT
Brunei	No	No	No	No	No	2006	No	2015 (s)
Cambodia	1992	2004 (s)	No	1992	No	1992	2010	1992
Indonesia	2006	No	No	2006	No	1984	2000 (s)	1998
Laos	2009	No	No	2007	No	1981	No	2012
Malaysia	No	No	No	No	No	1995	No	No
Myanmar	No	No	No	2015 (s)	No	1997	No	No
Philippines	1986	1989	2007	1974	No	1981	2001	1986
Singapore	No	No	No	No	No	1995	No	No
Thailand	1996	No	No	1999	No	1985	2000	2007
Timor-Leste	2003	No	2003	2003	2010 (s)	2003	2003	2003
Viet Nam	1982	No	No	1982	No	1982	No	2015

(s) = signed only, no ratification

Source: United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Status of Ratification Interactive Dashboard" (as of September 9, 2016), cited in Destination Justice 2018, 214

TABLE 2 Southeast Asian states' votes regarding the establishment of a UN Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Country	Vote
Brunei	No
Cambodia	Yes
Indonesia	No
Laos	Did not vote
Malaysia	No
Myanmar	Abstain
Philippines	Abstain*
Singapore	No
Thailand	Yes
Timor-Leste	Yes
Viet Nam	Yes

* The Philippine government in 2019 changed its position to Yes when the UN HR Council voted on the extension of the mandate of the UN IESOGI (United Nations Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity)

Source: GayNZ.com, cited in Destination Justice 2018, 215

The AICHR as a paper tiger

Sexual orientation and gender identity has been recognized as grounds for discrimination and violence by the United Nations and by rights monitoring bodies in Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

As a regional body, ASEAN operates its own human rights mechanisms through the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) that has a mandate to address human rights issues in the region under international law. While it has a number of independent-minded representatives in its roster who are serious in pursuing this mandate, the AICHR remains ineffective, incapacitated, and toothless in protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms mainly because of ASEAN's non-interference principle and emphasis on consensus (Piromya 2019). The AICHR cannot implement its plans and decisions because it is the member states or national governments

which should comply with human rights (Collins 2018). The AICHR, since its inception in 2009, was not really able to stand up for the rights of citizens in Southeast Asia (Piromya 2019) because the three fundamental elements of human rights protection are missing in the AICHR's operations: (1) a process or procedure for receiving complaints, (2) the right and facility to investigate on such complaints; and (3) the capacity to provide remedies (Collins 2018).

The LGBTQ+ activists and pride movements across the region mobilized by ASC have had sporadic meetings with the AICHR. They acknowledged that a couple of spirited AICHR representatives support SOGIESC-based advocacies. However, this inter-governmental body lacks any protection mechanism for SOGIESC equality and LGBTQ+ rights (Destination Justice 2018). A passive “wait-and-see” position has become the “official position” of the AICHR—and the ASEAN in general—in responding to the conflicts that arise between pro- and anti-equality formations in the region. This has set a dangerous precedent as the first regional intergovernmental human rights monitoring body. The AICHR has blamed religion and culture for holding back its commitment to recognizing that all human beings have human rights and that LGBTQ+ rights are human rights.

Understanding the ASEAN agenda

In understanding this troubling and unjust inaction on the part of ASEAN, it is important to profoundly comprehend through its economic angle why the centrality of human rights and social justice is not within its realms. The history and evolution of ASEAN as a regional body mirror its heavy preference for regional economic integration. In fact, the unbridled union of the “ASEAN Way” and the vision for economic integration has compromised the reputation of this regional body in the face of many civil society even as ASEAN saw it as their “competence power” (Nesadurai 2008, 235).

In 1978, ASEAN already took the advantage of the Cold War to construct its regional economic cooperation when it initiated the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference as a single corporate entity with its dialogue partners: Australia, US, the European Union, and

Japan (ibid.). In the 1990s, the dialogue partners extended to South Korea, Russia, and China which paved the way for the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 as the first multilateral security forum (ibid.). Meanwhile, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) was formed in 1992 to attract foreign direct investments to a single, geographical economic space that is Southeast Asia (ibid.). Although there were internal struggles among ASEAN states to balance liberalization policies with their domestic economic interests (ibid.), such formations demonstrated the beginning of a long-term goal for regional liberalization that later facilitated the creation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), making the region as an integrated and singular market and production base. Under the AEC, the ASEAN opts for business to spool the thread of its regional integration ambition to concede to the demands of the 21st century global economy. Thus, explains its present-day enthusiasm over new generation trade deals.

Beginning 2015, the ASEAN established the ASEAN Community, comprising the AEC, along with the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) and the ASEAN Socio-cultural Community (ASCC), to chart its regional integration direction. Dovetailing these three pillars was the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the three corresponding Blueprints that extensively discussed the content of each of these pillars (ASEAN Secretariat 2019). Among the three pillars, the ASEAN tirelessly exhausts most of its energy in the AEC as obviously manifested in its Integration Report 2019 which claimed to be building on the success of the first AEC Blueprint that culminated in 2015 (ibid.).

Moving toward 2025, the ASEAN envisions five interrelated and mutually reinforcing characteristics: (1) a highly integrated and cohesive economy; (2) a competitive, innovative, and dynamic ASEAN; (3) enhanced connectivity and sectoral cooperation; (4) a resilient, inclusive, people-oriented, and people-centered ASEAN; and (5) a global ASEAN (ibid.).

The ASEAN is strongly committed to reinforce its external economic relations as it identifies its internal integration with “open regionalism” in the pursuit of a global ASEAN. The report elaborated this as it mentioned the free trade and investments agreements with

its trade partners: Hong Kong, China, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the ongoing negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a larger free trading deal being claimed as an “ASEAN-led framework for regional trade architecture” (ASEAN Secretariat 2019, 168).

The RCEP is a new-generation free trade agreement being spearheaded by the ten ASEAN member states with Australia, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, and China.⁵ It seeks to cover regional cooperation in the trade of goods and services, investment, economic and technical cooperation, intellectual property rights, competition policy and dispute settlement, among others (Purugganan 2017). And looking further into this ambitious megadeal, it is more than just a competition over markets, but a battle over trade rules “who gets to set the rules and whose interests should be favored or protected by these rules” (Purugganan 2019). Even when the ASEAN asserted its centrality in the negotiations, it cannot match the economic size and power of its trading partners in terms of gross domestic product (*ibid.*). Two of the most contentious chapters that were momentarily sidelined in the negotiations are the provisions on the investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism, a corporate tool to sue governments and weaken the power of states to regulate investment; and the intellectual property (IP) chapter, which would compel developing countries with weaker IP rights regulations to adjust their laws to comply with RCEP’s higher standards of protection (*ibid.*). This chapter, which also concerns copyright protection standards, may likewise have unintended effects of stifling creativity, free speech, and economic growth (Law and Technology Centre, The University of Hong Kong 2017).

Various people’s movements and individuals have criticized the transparency of the negotiations which were done with very limited public consultation and where results of the negotiating texts have yet to be released for public scrutiny (Purugganan 2019; Law and Technology Centre, The University of Hong Kong 2017). During the

⁵ The RCEP was still being negotiated during the time of the development of this paper. During this time, India was still part of the original negotiating states until it opted out of the RCEP on November 4, 2019.

ACSC/APF 2019 in Thailand, peoples' movements renewed their call on governments to reject the RCEP.

As the AEC progresses through the RCEP negotiations, the missing part, however, is the sincerity in fulfilling the social agenda that should have described ASEAN's aspiration to become people-centered and people-oriented. Way before the construction of these ASEAN Community Pillars, civil society already slammed ASEAN's privileging of economic integration over other socio-political norms (Nesadurai 2008). As the Community Pillars unfolded, the Socio-Cultural Pillar focused more on the national security framework, deviating from the CSO's centrality on rights-based and human security approach (Nesadurai 2012). Notably, the ACSC/APF saw a de facto downgrading of its status before ASEAN as the mention of "ACSC" in the 2009 version of the ASCC Blueprint's Chapter E (Building ASEAN Identity), Section E4 (Engagement with the Community) was removed from the 2015 version (in reference to Vision 2025). The latest document instead just simply refers to civil society and government engagements (Lopa 2016).

The AEC is therefore fashioned to look as if it prioritizes peoples' welfare. However, its details unveil the focus on business and multinationals (Santiago 2015). Using sharp words, Santiago (2015), a seasoned Malaysian parliamentarian and a staunch human rights advocate, described that the spirit of the AEC has been nothing but a race to the bottom with domestic and global capital at the expense of the exploited people of the region.

It is business as usual for the ASEAN. The AEC vividly underscores an all-out preference for private sector initiatives, trade and foreign investments, and multinational corporations that have bred entrenched inequalities within countries, extensive human rights violations, situations of conflict and violence, and wanton exploitation of natural resources. What is also apparent is the yawning gap between the richest members of ASEAN and those still grappling for development (ACSC/APF 2017).

This utterly magnanimous support for business and corporate interest reflects what Nesadurai (2012) argued, that the AEC, with

its neo-liberal elements, is clearly at odds with civil society's agenda. It puts primacy on competition and productivity but fails to integrate the principles of human rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability (ibid.).

As the situation describes, ASEAN's language of market and economics runs contrary to the human interest of the region's population. The trajectory of its development paradigm is the endless pursuit for economic growth, regardless of any adversarial impact that may arise. These days, with stronger authoritarian tendencies of ASEAN member states, it becomes more challenging for civil society to hold the ASEAN accountable, where corporate power is gaining much traction and where peoples' opposition is most critical (ACSC/APF 2017).

This political and economic interplay in the ASEAN deserves a much needed appreciation when pushing for the demand for democratization in the region. From the transition period after the Cold War to the neoliberal globalization era, the world market increasingly puts pressure to this regional bloc in the name of economic stability and global competitiveness. The result of all these unjust and discriminatory connections always place the LGBTQ+ and other marginalized peoples at the receiving end of development.

Solidarity in the LGBTQ+, queering development

ASEAN for elite heteropatriarchy?

From a properly materialist analysis, this economic phenomenon is bolstered by and bolsters a socio-cultural structure that solicits tacit consent for such inclination towards capital accumulation. Considering the deliberate exclusion of LGBTQ+ discrimination and SOGIESC-based violence in ASEAN's policymaking and human rights mechanism, a socio-cultural code that decides which sex's concerns matter more than those of others must be operating in ASEAN's model of regionalism. Historically, the ASEAN per se is an institutional product of a system that reproduces heteronormative politics.

It is worth retelling that the ASEAN was first convened by five male foreign ministers, otherwise hailed as the “founding fathers” of the ASEAN in the 1960s (ASEAN n.d.)—even such a delegation is male-centric.⁶ Inaugural objectives express a high preoccupation on poverty eradication, structural adjustments, growth, intra-ASEAN dispute, and an end to communist insurgencies in the region, influenced by the Cold War and the US “Red Scare” propaganda and shrouded by the slogan of building regional peace and stability until today (Eccleston, Dawson, and McNamara 1998, 311). At that time, ASEAN saw Communists as a challenge with its intensification in Southeast Asia following the Communist victories in Indochina (Soon 1976). Collins (2008) argued that the ASEAN’s history revealed the centrality of state security as a way of safeguarding the elite. Human rights were not in their political radar.

Under the current situation, human rights sensitively tackle the adverse impact of neoliberalism that is well entrenched in the regional economic engagements of the ASEAN. This suggests that the LGBTQ+ community, who are part of this phenomenon of marginalization under the neoliberal order, will remain unheard of as they continue to be unseen in the eyes of ASEAN leaders. A crucial contribution of the LGBTQ+ community therefore would be to engage SOGIESC-based activism to the tactical solidarity-based battles for social justice as neoliberalism encroaches all the corners of public and private (even sexual) life. In many occasions, some LGBTQ+ activists in the Philippines have tried to carry this forward. One of the landmark events in the history of Pride March in the Philippines is the 1994 LGBTQ+ mass action which, aside from commemorating the Stonewall Uprising of 1969 and protesting the many forms of discrimination and state-sanctioned homophobia, also dared to raise the issues of onerous taxation (calling to scrap value-added tax) and the oil price hike that affected not only them, but the Filipino people in general (Kapederasyon 2016; Evangelista 2017). In the proceeding Pride celebrations decades after, queer activists

⁶ The five foreign ministers were Adam Malik of Indonesia, Narciso R. Ramos of the Philippines, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, and Thanat Khoman of Thailand.

brought the issue of labor contractualization of the country's top-selling rum company during the event to show their support to the striking workers (Kapederasyon 2016). Both examples showed the courage and depth of perspective of the queer peoples to intersect their own fight for identity and recognition with the mass movement's struggle against regressive policies and exploitative conditions under neoliberalism.

Solidarity as counter-strategy

In order to produce a counternarrative, Mason (2018) recommends that queering the concept of development is an important theoretical interruption of ongoing processes and powers that have been reinforced by heteronormativity. Being queer is about challenging not only sexual norms, but also other cemented codes operating in society that normalize the status quo, such as current norms in understanding development (Jolly 2000, cited in Mason 2018). For peoples in the Third World, queer politics also concerns poverty, imperialism, and underdevelopment. The fight for gender equality is braided with the liberation from poverty and socio-economic dependency (Kinsman 2019). Solidarity, then, must be the core of LGBTQ+ and SOGIESC-based activism. This is a product of a people-to-people interaction that works hard to overcome social inequalities along with systematic transformation of societies. Emerging from the ideologies and histories of plurality and diversity, it values and extends support to the important political struggles of other communities beyond borders. The praxis behind solidarity concerns the presence of a greater opportunity for people to share their experiences and knowledge, learn from each other, and build networks (Tadem et al. 2020).

Today, it is generally accepted by many CSOs that sex and gender intersect with other realms of positionality, such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, geographical location, and citizenship. Nevertheless, caution must be made, as bigtime non-government organizations (NGOs) and global institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund "seek to shape and deploy information, symbols, and expertise to frame [issues] in ways that suit their purposes best" (Kollman and Waites 2009, 9). Whereas these institutions have made significant contributions in the queer liberation movement (case in point, the

ILGA), many a feminist and queer specialist has launched criticisms against the rhetoric developed and utilized by these institutions: human rights. To Jackson (1998, 70), “the issue of rights is posed in terms of equality with heterosexuals.” To Seckinelgin (quoted in Kollman and Waites 2009, 9), same-sex marriage laws and other gender equality legislations lobbied around the world by NGOs and other institutions “[tie] recognition to specific categories and [imply] that these categories and universal and natural [thus] human rights norms limit sexual diversity and positive recognition of sexual difference.” Human rights discourse, in other words, misses the point that “homosexualities will inevitably be regulated, oppressed and stigmatised while heterosexuality retains its privileged position as the unquestioned, institutionalised cultural norm” (Jackson 1998, 74). It also blankets over diverse gender identities and the granting of self-autonomy to determine one’s gender identity and expression. Non-state actors seem to have no other way but to lobby for queer liberation *through identifiable categories*—the *human*, which defeats the purpose. Yet, the focus on rights both limits the diversity of queerness, which is its *raison d’être*, and depoliticizes the movement by leaving oppression and heterosexual privilege—chained to the economic necessity/fiction of “family” within capitalist production—unquestioned (Engels 2000, 42).

Indeed, human rights are a process and a product of social movements. Seventy years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations General Assembly, its claim of universality has been consistently challenged to benefit ruling interests. Hegemonic state actors have configured the human to stipulate deep-seated bigoted notions of what is “human,” which may exclude the diversity of the LGBTQ+ sector. “While all human beings are deemed born naturally free endowed with equal rights, the very definition of human itself in practice is not always neutral and hence, dynamic” (Yulius 2018). Human rights, as mobilized by neoliberal institutions such as the ASEAN, have thus only relegated the sector’s specific needs and experiences into an inferior status within the mainstream HR movements. The regional diversity of Southeast Asia further provokes us to disturb a hegemonic configuration of formal equality as a human right attuned to the nuanced cultural differences of queer identities and experiences in the region.

This requires us to imagine more creatively tolerance and acceptance without necessarily boxing ourselves within liberal human rights discourses. The researchers propose that to move forward and deepen the agenda for queer liberation, the LGBTQ+ movement must adopt an internationalist character by building an alliance with the labor front, founded on a common identification between queer people and all working people worldwide (Drucker 2017).

In answering this question, however, attention must be redirected to what political economist Nancy Fraser (2012, 4) views as a major issue of concern: the “dangerous liaison” between feminism and marketization. Feminisms have achieved so much in women’s liberation. Still, Fraser outlines two cases that emerge from this liaison, cases which this paper believes to be insights drawn from critical feminist IPE. First is the age of the “universal breadwinner” (ibid., 8). “Equality feminists” have asserted for work equality among men and women. Despite winning this battle, women’s work remains devalued. Work historically assigned to men have been feminized to cater to women. These jobs are located in a global assembly chain, which requires the circulation of labor and capital across the globe in the creation of a product. This chain guarantees neither a stable career nor healthy working conditions for women.

This may be an uphill task given the prevalence of heteronormativity among mainstream labor movements within capitalism’s binarized division of labor on the basis of sex (Engels 2000, 33–44). However, the LGBTQ+ community possesses a valuable capacity to queer the labor movement and thereby underscore class politics among queer groups (Drucker 2017).

Faced with this challenge to broaden queer politics, many LGBTQ+ activists and groups in Southeast Asia recognize the “intersection” of their interests with issues of civil liberties and freedoms. Providing a concrete case to help inspire activists across cultures and identities in appreciating the nexus between what is political, social, economic, and sexual, Drucker (2018) cites the South African movement of peoples, specifically those living with HIV/AIDS who waged the struggle for peoples’ access to health care. This landmark activism of South Africa’s Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) is one of the

emblematic examples of queering the grassroots movement to a great extent. From the local political zone in South Africa, TAC brought the fight against the vested-interest of pharmaceutical multinationals and the global medical industry to the international advocacy arena in order to express that the human right to access adequate health care should prevail over businesses' intellectual property rights and the right to profit. Because of TAC's bold steps, it became an epicenter in the fight for global justice against drug patenting of pharmaceutical companies and the free trade agenda of the World Trade Organization under international neoliberalism. The case of TAC highlighted the connection between sexual emancipation and global justice and, correspondingly, the solidarity between social movements with solid and active LGBT base and radical political movements (*ibid.*).

Queer spaces within alternative regionalism

The alarmingly shrinking regional space for dialogue and dissent only fortifies the urgent need for alternative regionalism, a ground-based collaboration that anchors to the re-imagination or re-definition of spaces and participation from the perspective of the marginalized and neglected sector. This is about creating bigger spaces of contestation when previously there were only pockets of resistance, building a platform for diverse opinions to be heard or otherwise debate issues when there was little room for public participation before, and enabling people to reclaim their spaces that were denied from them (Cornwall 2002, 2). From a feminist political geography perspective, these initiatives of women, lesbians, and transgender included elaborate the efforts of transforming the space under the theme of negative space and identity within a heteronormative society (Price-Chalita 1994). Citing the confluence of the literary space and the trope of the map as a spatial metaphor for empowerment, this is understood as the "appropriation of the spatial" by creating new spaces, occupying existing spaces that also highlights "revalorizing negatively-labelled spaces" through making important political statement in positive spatial terms (*ibid.*, 239). A final instance of appropriating (allocating) the spatial involves revalorizing spaces and places that are not viewed as powerful within dominant discourse (*ibid.*, 241).

The task therefore of LGBTQ+ peoples and civil society in general is to revalorize this already shrinking space imaginary which under the neoliberal condition, nevertheless, allows activism and resistance to flourish. This “predatory mode of capitalist development” prevalent in the region that pursues “growth at all costs” governed with “authoritarian state behaviour” (Gerard 2015, 7) has actually provided a fertile ground for civil society to organize and mobilize this “regionalisation of activism” (ibid.) or “regionalism from below” (Nesadurai 2012, 175), where people who are neglected and marginalized collaborate to create their space and find their common issues that arose from across countries and cross borders. These are sites of radical possibility or critical spaces of the poor as platforms for action to resist, to challenge their conditions and create alternatives (Cornwall 2002). These spaces have become spaces for intersectionality, or “horizontal solidarities,” cross-cutting the usual boundaries between issues which are important in advancing queer communities’ alternatives and advocacies (Drucker 2018). Described as a “school for citizenship” in which participants learn new meanings and practices of citizenship (Cornwall and Coelho 2007) through solidarity work and collective action rooted from their diversities and commonalities, these initiatives motivate them to see beyond their own parochial or country-based problem and evolve into a regional perspective.

Rendering theory into praxis, queer activists in Southeast Asia consider the ACSC/APF, despite its past unsuccessful interfaces with ASEAN, as a positive social space that recognizes their issues as legitimate human rights issues (Destination Justice 2018). When the Philippines hosted the ACSC/APF in 2017, Convergence Spaces that consolidated diverse CSOs coming from inter-sectional themes were formed. Queer activists, through the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, became core organizers of a Convergence Space on Human Rights and Access to Justice, which integrated critical LGBTQ+ discourse on non-discrimination, inclusivity, and diversity principles (ACSC/APF 2018). These Convergence Spaces were officially adopted in the succeeding ACSC/APF.

The other responsibility of civil society is to develop an alternative knowledge that deconstructs prevailing concepts, policies, and practices

related to the neo-liberal economic globalization (ACSC/APF 2018; Tadem et al. 2020). And from that, the mission is to create a coherent counter-hegemonic project from the dominant ASEAN framework of development, to strengthen solidarity, to articulate strongly and advance alternative regional models (Nesadurai 2012).

Following this path to alternative regionalism, the first imperative is to distinguish the ASEAN, a regional state-supported bloc composed exclusively of ten-member countries, from the bigger and wider scope of Southeast Asia that is a geopolitical region of diverse peoples of all sexes, sexualities, and genders who share common cultures, traditions, histories, and struggles.

What does this Southeast Asia look like? Aside from the ten ASEAN countries, Southeast Asia also includes peoples of Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste. Moreover, according to the geographical demarcations of “Zomia,” Southeast Asia straddles the states of Northeast India (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura) and the provinces in Southwest China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and Sichuan) (Scott 2009). Here, the region encompasses all the lands at elevations above 300 meters stretching from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India. As championed by the ACSC/APF based on the principle of inclusivity, the region should recognize as equally important the diverse migrants in Southeast Asia, such as the immigrants within the region, the undocumented and persons in trafficked situation, and the diaspora communities who constantly face insecurity otherwise known as the stateless peoples who are forcibly evicted and are continuously denied citizenship. In other words, the identity of a region rests from the vantage point of the peoples who self-determine themselves as Southeast Asians or those living in this geographical region but are at all times excluded from ASEAN and the mainstream development perspective (ACSC/APF 2018).

This kind of regionalism must be woven from a relational fabric of alternative vision of a region that is not contingent on citizenship and location. It is developed from the various forms of people-to-people exchange, growing from multitudes of initiatives that defy the dominant and mainstream narrative, paradigm, concepts, and policies

such as ASEAN regional integration. After all, networks of civil society organizations have been working on campaigns, projects, and activism on environmental issues, women's and queer rights, workers' and peasants' rights, human rights, socio-economic, commons, human security, and more (Tadem et al. 2020). This radical vision of regionalism is along the principles of solidarity, cooperation, and complementarity and grounded on peoples' alternative practices that have proven to transform regional solidarity (*ibid.*). Mass mobilizations during international gatherings, lobbying with states and multilateral organizations, the emergence of the party-list system, and direct actions such as unilateral occupation of land and housing projects have been sites where political advocacies are undertaken (*ibid.*). Social media campaigns bearing emancipatory messages have also been engaged by networks and emerging formations. Self-help groups and shelters have existed as well to sustain social protection activities.

To close this cursory study, reflection, and proposal-in-one, we present three alternatives—out of the many that exist in Southeast Asia—that exemplify the practices of solidarity that can build and sustain regional solidarity that cuts across marginalized positions, experiences, and visions. While not the sole representatives of the diversity of practices in the region, the ASC, Arcoiris in Timor-Leste, and 100% Yogyakarta in Indonesia, all illustrate how queer solidarity with poor, oppressed, and marginalized sectors and civil society take the shape of political, social, and cultural alternatives.

Refusing to take a backseat, the ASC tries to situate queer's participation in alternative regionalism as it strengthens its political leverage to resist hegemonic and heteronormative regional governance arrangements of ASEAN. ASC undergoes a process of re-developing the value of collective memory in amplifying the demands of the LGBTQ+ community that strives to bridge the other demands of civil society. They explained collective memory as a reference to their cultural narratives that are centered on a shared identity in relation to both an imagined common past and a common vision of the future. Derived from an evolving culture and shared values and principles, this collection of remembrance also serves as a synthesis of recognized historical events and their meanings to the LGBTQ+ existence (ASC 2020). In its articulation of the memory, the operative verb is

remembering. It is a retrospect that requires a deeper understanding of life's past events or accounts with historical significance that help them reconstruct their contemporary notion of identity with strong correlation to their ongoing activism. This is a deflection from the binary discourse on identity and sexuality that is largely promoted by the state and its institutions.

Determined to defend this “memory activism,” these LGBTQ+ activists believe that there is underexplored cultural evidence of Southeast Asia, both past and present that affirms gender and sexual diversity but is hidden behind ASEAN's heteropatriarchal narrative. Still on its early stage, what is hoped for is for these memories to serve as a springboard that will help solidify the growing movement of alternatives across the region.

A personal history can somehow be a powerful instrument that traces one's transformative journey to self-discovery and activism. For instance, Cambodian activist Srun Sorn, the co-founder of CamASEAN Youth's Future, disclosed that his (or her) unusual personal encounter of a lesbian mother in 2002 became the fulcrum for his/her queer activism (Destination Justice 2018). One day, while visiting a community to implement a vaccination project for mothers and infants, Sorn met a woman in tattered clothes holding her sick child. In their next meet up for the second vaccination, the woman recounted her forced marriage, the constant beating, and the consequent sexual abuse done by her husband because she is a ‘woman who loves other women’ and the husband reportedly discovered that only after their marriage (ibid., 52). Sorn's encounter of this culture of violence illustrates deep truths that the memory is not just a repository of someone's or a group's past events, but it also serves as the cradle of motivation for a person to make an impact to society. This experience, as an act of memorialization, “interrogates and condemns the universalism defended by claims of objectivity as paradigmatic of a special group”—elite men—who comprise majority of authoritative government positions (Tickner 1997, 617). Queer memory, here, unfurls a disruption of hitherto accepted categories and truths.

Another SOGIESC-based alternative practice in Southeast Asia is the Arcoiris, the first LBT (lesbians, bisexuals, and transmen) group

in Timor-Leste. Based on the Portuguese word for “rainbow,” Arcoiris has actually jumpstarted this approach, driven by a common objective to support LBT persons suffering from sexual abuse, discrimination, and other forms of violence, as well as to raise public awareness about the untold horrific stories of these women who endured that pain from their families, community, and society. Arcoiris conducted a pioneering research which sheds light to the concerns and challenges faced by Timorese LBT women (Saeed and Galhos 2017). Using personal memories to describe their marginalized and suppressed identities, the members of Arcoiris dared recall their silenced past of how society confronted those who do not conform to prevailing societal norms. And such stories mostly occurred in a landscape of poor socio-economic condition, with less social support and care (*ibid.*). They altogether put these shards of memories into writing and published it, even when the publication cost them their lives which were determined for a long time by a domineering narrative of heterosexuality.

This kind of a life “herstory” development that bestrides as an action research became a turning point for LBT movement in Timor-Leste that led to their first Pride March in 2017 with the active involvement of other non-binary peoples. Arcoiris members were later invited in gatherings to present their research findings along with their powerful testimonies. It eventually spurred the creation of a safe space with support group for LBT persons, a venue for deep-seated solidarity where they meet, share, accept, connect, validate, or just for homestay. In this space, they rise united to challenge the normalization of violence against peoples of diverse SOGIE in Timor-Leste (Saeed 2018).

What Arcoiris does and continues to do so in its safe space only demonstrates that peoples in Southeast Asia create their own (i.e., better) ways of working together in defense of their space and their lives. The foundation of this possibility are the alternative practices emerging from the confluence of their resistance and solidarity with other civil liberties and freedoms. They can materialize a path to development that responds to their needs, even outside the peripheries of government processes.

Demonstrating the potential of cultural alternatives, 100% Yogyakarta celebrates awareness and acceptance through the arts.

The event has been described as a “a gathering that is a city, a group just beginning to experience itself, a choir that has never practiced, an impossible entity with many faces—assembled into ever-changing new group pictures: group pictures as replacement for family—as fleeting portraits of belonging” (Gokkon 2015). What sounds nebulous in form is in fact a unique production launched by internationally acclaimed Indonesian theatre troupe Garasi Performance Institute and a group of German directors Rimini Protokoll starring Yogyakarta’s layfolk sharing their everyday life and struggle. The Institute and Protokoll’s “100%” projects envisioned bringing together communities by allowing them to share regarding pertinent issues with the intention of increasing social tolerance, or as we argue here, acceptance. The same project has been launched in Vienna, Zurich, London, Tokyo, and Melbourne, with Yogyakarta as the 27th city in the circuit.

The performance in Indonesia deserves interest given the participation of a transman, along with other members of the LGBTQ+ community, in a play featuring local food vendors, housewives who make *batik* wear, a 90-year-old woman, and a woman who was imprisoned without trial during the 1965 anti-communist purge, to name a few. Such a choice, which calls attention to the existence of uniquely queer challenges, places the LGBTQ+ within the diverse panorama of the marginalized sectors, each with their own plight that together recognizes the socio-economic structures that sustain inequality, such as heteropatriarchy and the concentration of wealth to the elite (male) few. The performance art becomes all the more provocative given the “gargantuan struggle” faced by the LGBTQ+ in conservative Indonesia (Saputra 2020). 100% Yogyakarta, responding to the similarly conservative Indonesian government that sustains SOGIESC-based discrimination, paints fleeting portraits of belonging, asking questions such as “who is missing? Who thinks they might give answers on stage that are different from the ones they’d give in response to a telephone survey or in the voting booth? And what have the statistics failed to record? Who thinks that this city is different because they are a part of it?” (Gokkon 2015) Not only is this an alternative to dominant, patron-serving bourgeois art forms (Guillermo 2010). The performance also shows an alternative to the hardly existent solidarity among the marginalized many fostered by the national government and by the ASEAN at large.

These political, social, and cultural alternatives have been sowing the seeds of a regional platform that truly crosses borders and connects boundaries which only the peoples themselves can establish. 100% Yogyakarta places, underscores, and unites the struggles of the LGBTQ+ sector with those of other marginalized sectors. Arcoiris ensures a safe space for LBT peoples, practicing “safety” not just as a shelter but also as a platform for lobbying for LBT rights. The ASC fosters networks and engages in unusual yet promising projects that systematically respond to the claims of the governments that LGBTQ+ people’s lives, allegedly influenced by “dangerous western values,” stand in contrary to so-called “traditions” and “norms.” ASC’s memory activism, along with a multitude of practices across the region, decolonizes the LGBTQ+ and reimagines the sector’s solidarity with other groups.

Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, ASEAN’s focus on a regional economic enterprise and the lack of attention to human rights issues beget the inadvertent disenfranchisement of LGBTQ+ visibility in public discourse and policy across the region. Looking at how the ACSC/APF has evolved after more than ten years as a peoples’ platform, with more regional groupings joining in such as the ASC, the region is actually in its tract of forming a dynamic people-led and gender-balanced alternative regionalism which Nesadurai (2012, 175) described as a phenomenon of an increasing coherent counter-regionalism that will gain strength even as it faces obstacle from ASEAN governments in the region. The three cases discussed in this paper, out of the many alternatives that exhibit LGBTQ+ solidarity against hegemonic (and heteronormative) forces, only shows the potential of queer activism in the region, that will only further unfurl with solidarity against political economic repression.

Already, Southeast Asia has countless community-based alternatives that thrive successfully and independently from governments. These are but examples to a long list of heterodox practices, networks, and movements that represent marginalized sectors such as the LGBTQ+. However, even though they exist, their chronicles remain unpopular,

under-researched, and therefore, under-supported in the mainstream field of development. Since 2017, these alternative practitioners collectively stand beneath an alternative development vision within the ACSC/APF space and beyond. The proceeding task of civil society, however, is to create the infrastructure that will facilitate greater regional people-to-people interactions toward building a formidable people-led regional integration. ■

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