

Milk Tea Alliance: The Power of New Democracy in ASEAN and Efforts to Increase the Effectiveness of ASEAN Norms

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Abstract

Democracy and human rights issues in the ASEAN region came into the focus of attention with the emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance, a cross-border movement fighting for democratic values. This article aims to explore the role of the milk tea alliance movement as a new democratic force in ASEAN and how it can be enhanced in effectiveness through adaptation to existing ASEAN norms and institutions. Methodologically, secondary data collection often involves the use of literature research techniques and is analyzed explanatory with the framework of constructivist analysis to understand the social construction of identity, norms, and political relations in ASEAN with the movement. This research shows that this movement effectively increases public awareness of democratic principles. Nonetheless, normative and institutional challenges in the ASEAN region require the implementation of adequate adaptive measures. The study presents several tactics aimed at increasing the influence of this movement in facilitating democratic progress in the ASEAN region.

Keywords: Association of southeast asian nations, democracy, milk tea alliance, social movement



INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia, known as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), is the focus of international attention due to its diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religions, and political systems. In recent years, the emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance has become a significant and important element in the geopolitical landscape of the region. The Milk Tea Alliance is an internet-based movement focused on democracy and human rights, mostly comprising of individuals from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar (Utama, 2022). The Milk Tea Alliance utilizes social media as a primary tool to coordinate their actions and spread its message (Schaffar & Wongratanawin, 2021). The genesis of this phenomenon can be traced back to its inception as an internet meme, which emerged as a reaction to the growing prevalence of Chinese nationalist commenters on various social media platforms. Over time, it has transformed into a vibrant transnational protest movement that actively opposes tyranny and promotes the ideals of democracy. The movement quickly spread throughout the Southeast Asian region and became a symbol of resistance to authoritarianism and restrictions on freedom in various countries in ASEAN. With roots that are cross-country and cross-cultural, the milk tea alliance has become an important phenomenon in ASEAN's complicated regional politics.

In the midst of this diversity, the growth of the Milk tea alliance is an interesting issue to research. This movement emerged as a reaction to the political dynamics in some ASEAN countries and has the main objective of promoting democratic values and human rights (Tower, 2022). However, the main issue that needs to be solved is how this movement can function effectively in a region known for ASEAN norms that emphasize state sovereignty. The political and cultural diversity in ASEAN has created complexities in relations between countries. Meanwhile, ASEAN norms emphasizing the principle of non-intervention and state sovereignty have become the basis for cooperation in the region (Davies, 2013). However, this complexity is further represented by the emergence of the *Milk tea alliance*, which challenges these norms by promoting universal values such as individual rights and democracy.

The author has conducted a literature review that explains that social movements such as the Milk Tea Alliance have the potential to change regional political dynamics (Schaffar & Wongratanawin, 2021). Previous research has highlighted the impact of civil society's role in driving political change and destabilizing existing norms. However, a major limitation in previous research was the lack of in-depth focus on how the Milk Tea Alliance responds to and interacts with existing normative challenges in ASEAN. This movement relies on social media as an effective movement tool, one of which is through the Royalists Marketplace created by Pavin Chachavalpongpun, during the demonstration this group actively discussed these activities and their impact on democracy in Thailand (Schaffar, 2021). In addition, the article highlights the role of social media in mobilizing and organizing protests, the importance of international support, and the influence of pop culture in such protests. Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker provide a broader context to understand the role of social media in shaping democratic movements and political change (Kreiss, 2021). In addition, another study that also corroborates this is that this is also motivated by the phenomenon of digital activities which provides valuable insights into the dynamics of online activism and its impact in the region (Reynaldi et al., 2023). This research is important because the movement shows the huge potential influence of civil society in shaping

political agendas in a region often dominated by governments. This research attempts to bridge the gap in understanding of how regional norms influence social movements in ASEAN. As such, this article seeks to provide deeper insight into the role of the milk tea alliance in the ASEAN political context as well as its implications for democratic developments in the region.

This movement not only faces support, but also severe challenges arising from the norms and institutions that exist within the ASEAN framework. The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of this movement in ASEAN political dynamics as well as identify ways to increase its effectiveness through adaptation to existing ASEAN norms and institutions.

METHOD

Research on the Milk Tea Alliance movement was conducted using a qualitative approach that was in accordance with the theoretical framework of constructivism. Secondary qualitative data is obtained through literature research techniques by referring to various sources such as books, journal articles, proceedings, reports, and online references. Data analysis is carried out with an explanatory approach, which allows a deeper understanding of the problems identified in the research question. In this context, the research also adopts a constructivist theoretical framework that emphasizes the role of norms in shaping the actions of international actors and how social interactions can change those norms. However, it should be acknowledged that this study has limitations, including limitations of secondary data available and potential bias in the sources used. Nonetheless, through this approach, the research aims to uncover how ASEAN regional norms influence and are influenced by the Milk Tea Alliance movement, providing a deeper understanding of the dynamics of international relations in the ASEAN region within the framework of constructivism theory.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Emergence of The Milk Tea Alliance

The Milk Tea Alliance has emerged as an important phenomenon in early 2020, initially responding to political dynamics impacting many countries in Southeast Asia (Tanakasempipat & Chow, 2020). This movement originated from political intrigue that occurred in Thailand, namely about the court's decision to dissolve one of the pro-democracy parties known as the Future Forward Party (FFP). The party made its debut in the 2019 elections and received the third largest vote in parliament (Reuters, 2019). Wanchalearm Satsaksit disappeared in Cambodia, seeking refuge after a military coup in 2014. Over time, these protests developed into calls for political reform and demands for change in the Thai government. The demonstrations quickly garnered global media coverage and exposed deep political divisions in Thai society.

The emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance can be understood as a manifestation of support, solidarity, and transnational involvement in relation to the demonstrations in Thailand. Initial support was provided by civil society organizations, activists, and individuals from external sources, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, who have previous experience in fighting the Chinese Government and advocating democratic values (Kironka, 2021). The importance of social media and leading platforms in enabling cross-border mass communication and mobility was an

important factor in the formation of this movement. It facilitated the dissemination of pro-democracy, human rights, and free speech messages on a world scale, generating substantial international support.

In addition to its involvement in Thailand's political dynamics, the Milk Tea Alliance quickly garnered support from a diverse range of civil society organizations in adjacent countries including Hong Kong and Taiwan. The cross-border solidarity demonstrations exemplified the importance of the movement as a symbolic expression of opposition to authoritarianism and human rights abuses in the heterogeneous Southeast Asian region. Within an academic framework, the development of the Milk Tea Alliance serves as an example of transnational civil society engagement in addressing political shifts in a region undergoing significant transformation.

The resistance that also occurred in Hong Kong can be understood as a manifestation of the democratic process in response to the threat of authoritarian rule emanating from the Chinese government (Chang, 2021). The Milk Tea Alliance takes an important role in defining and strengthening this collective identity by bringing together individuals and collectives that support democratic principles and advocate for human rights. This global dimension of democratic identity is exemplified by the cross-border solidarity displayed in this movement, which includes followers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and various other countries.

The movement also seeks to exert influence over political norms in Hong Kong by emphasizing the importance of democracy, public engagement, and freedom of expression as ideals that need to be prioritized. The utilization of social media and contemporary communication technologies has emerged as the main media to reinforce pro-democracy and human rights narratives, giving birth to a new social landscape that highlights the importance of these principles within the framework of Society. Similarly, in Taiwan, the active support of the Taiwanese people for this movement can be seen as an indication of a shift in domestic political norms. The positive response from the people and government of Taiwan also reflects Taiwan's strong political identity as a country committed to the values of human rights and freedoms (Kironka, 2021).

Impact of Milk Tea Alliance on ASEAN countries

The Milk Tea Alliance also creates strong cross-border solidarity across the ASEAN region. Civil society, activists, and individuals from ASEAN countries united to support the struggle for democracy in various ASEAN member states. This solidarity creates significant political pressure on governments in ASEAN to meet the demands of democracy and human rights (Schaffar, 2021). Amid geopolitical tensions in the region, the Milk Tea Alliance also influences the dynamics of relations between ASEAN countries and countries outside the region (Schaffar & Wongratanawin, 2021).

In the context of government response, various ASEAN countries have responded to the Milk Tea Alliance in various ways. Some governments have responded with crackdowns, such as arrests of pro-democracy activists and restrictions on free speech. As happened in Thailand, Indonesia, and Myanmar (Reynaldi et al., 2023). On the other hand, some countries have

responded to demands for political change with reforms and more inclusive policy changes. The government's response reflects the different political and normative dynamics in each ASEAN country, and in some cases, also reflects tensions in bilateral relations.

In addition, the Milk Tea Alliance also influences civil society in ASEAN countries by providing inspiration and support for democratic struggles. Pro-democracy activists and civil society groups in ASEAN countries feel connected to this movement and encouraged to be more active in fighting for their rights (Tanakasempipat & Chow, 2020). Thus, the Milk Tea Alliance not only creates an impact in regional politics but also influences the level of awareness and activism of civil society in ASEAN countries.

Challenges facing the Milk Tea Alliance

The main obstacle facing the Milk Tea Alliance campaign and pro-democracy movements in ASEAN countries is government repression. Such repression includes arrests of activists, the implementation of media controls, the imposition of restrictions on freedom of expression, and the imposition of other stringent measures with the aim of inhibiting or reducing the influence of the movement (Aljazeera, 2021).

Government repression is a major obstacle because it limits the capacity of pro-democracy movements to coordinate effectively, engage in political activity, and spread their ideological stance. Some examples of arrests and charges faced by activists can be seen in international news and Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that in recent years, the Thai government has cracked down on pro-democracy activists, arresting several prominent leaders of the movement, subsequently reviving protests. In Myanmar, the movement has been the driving force behind protests in Myanmar, which has faced a military coup and a crackdown on pro-democracy activists (Amnesty International, 2022). The adoption of such repressive tactics may generate fear among activists and members of civil society, possibly leading to decreased engagement (Boykoff, 2013).

In addition, government repression has the potential to create an environment characterized by legal ambiguity, where activists and demonstrators often face dubious legal charges (Utama, 2022). In both Thailand and Myanmar, local authorities made arrests of several activists and used articles of resistance to the legitimate government as an excuse to imprison them. This outcome could hamper their goals and force them to face significant legal consequences. To overcome these obstacles, pro-democracy movements in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) often need to promote transnational tactics and unity. In addition, they rely on international assistance to advocate for adherence to human rights, democracy, and freedom of expression by governments in ASEAN countries (Tobing, 2018).

Efforts to Change Norms in ASEAN

The ASEAN Charter has two main principles, which are widely recognized throughout the ASEAN community. These principles include the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and the principle of national sovereignty (Farhana, 2023). The principle of non-intervention underlines the importance of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states to refrain from intervening in the internal affairs of other member states. In the context of

international relations, the idea of state sovereignty underlines the inherent right of each state to exercise control over its internal affairs in line with its policies and personal interests. The aforementioned standards have emerged as the basic principles governing international relations in the ASEAN region, reflecting the view that countries in this geographical area are obliged to uphold the principle of sovereignty in their interactions. Nevertheless, over time, these societal standards have attracted controversy due to their potential exploitation by government agencies as a means to rationalize acts of oppression and human rights violations in their respective countries (Schaffar & Wongratanawin, 2021). The significance of the Milk Tea Alliance movement lies in its ability to understand and transform existing conventions.

The emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance Movement signifies the development of a transnational pro-democracy movement with the aim of advancing human rights and democracy in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. The movement consists of individuals, activists, and civil society organizations that use social media and other prominent media to communicate their thoughts (Reynaldi et al., 2023).

One of the main obstacles faced by this movement relates to the strategic change of ASEAN regional standards, which now prioritize state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. This cross-border movement takes place among ASEAN countries, characterized by diverse cultures, languages, and political systems. The aim is to challenge regional norms that have been recognized and accepted by ASEAN member states.

Creating Normative Change

According to the theory of constructivism by Alexander Wendt, international norms are thought to be shaped through social production and interaction between international actors (Dunne et al., 2013). It is important to know that these standards are not something fixed, but rather subject to transformation and evolution as a result of social construction. In this context, the Milk Tea Alliance seeks to influence the norms of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The Milk Tea Alliance movement, a social media-based movement that promotes democratic ideals and human rights, has the potential to shape the attitudes and perspectives of individuals living in ASEAN countries (Reynaldi et al., 2023). Public discourse and the cultivation of community pressure are very important in driving change, because both have the capacity to shape local norms (Dunne et al., 2013). Research by Daniel Kreiss (2021) has shown that social movements that are active in spreading pro-democracy and human rights messages through social media can change people's perceptions. By continuing to utilize social media platforms, the Milk Tea Alliance is able to influence public opinion and form a more progressive stance related to democracy and human rights in ASEAN (Schaffar, 2021).

Such movements also foster a sense of solidarity among civil society organizations, activists, and communities in ASEAN countries that are actively involved in this movement (Reynaldi et al., 2023). This sense of solidarity is based on the principles of democracy and the protection of human rights, which may conflict with prevailing regional norms that prioritize national sovereignty and non-intervention (Farhana, 2023). This solidarity puts pressure on

ASEAN governments, forcing them to pay greater attention to matters related to democracy and human rights.

The Milk Tea Alliance movement is gaining support from actors around the world advocating democratic principles and human rights (Utama, 2022). This form of assistance exerts political influence on ASEAN countries, prompting them to reassess their regional standards when addressing issues related to human rights. The aforementioned movements form their own identity centered on improving democracy and human rights in the ASEAN region. This particular identity contradicts standards that prioritize non-intervention in internal affairs and state sovereignty. Over a long period of time, this identity change has the potential to impact regional standard-setting.

Alexander Wendt thus offers a comprehensive and in-depth view, in this regard, of the efforts of the Milk Tea Alliance movement in making changes to ASEAN regional standards. This method facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the important role played by norms, identities, and relationships in shaping the dynamics of international relations in the ASEAN region from an academic point of view.

Impact on Democracy in ASEAN

The Milk Tea Alliance is a social movement that has created a significant impact on democracy in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). This movement emerged in response to various political and social issues in the region, and has brought about changes that affect political dynamics in ASEAN countries. In recent years, the Milk Tea Alliance has become an important force in promoting democracy and human rights in the region.

One of the main impacts of the Milk Tea Alliance is the raising of awareness about the importance of democracy among people in ASEAN. The movement uses social media and street demonstrations to voice democratic values, freedom of speech, and human rights (Reynaldi et al., 2023). They have garnered support from individuals across the region who share the same views on the importance of democracy in living a national and stately life. By bringing these issues to life, the Milk Tea Alliance has created a larger public space for discussion and understanding of democracy.

In addition, this movement also puts pressure on governments in ASEAN countries. Several countries within the region have faced criticism and prosecution from the Milk Tea Alliance related to human rights abuses, authoritarian practices, and inhibition of free speech. This pressure has made some governments have to be more careful in responding to the demands and aspirations of civil society that support this movement. Some of them have taken steps to improve their human rights track records in response to this pressure, such as MTA Indonesia and Myanmar (Utama, 2022). MTA Indonesia and Myanmar have portrayed the dialogue stance within the ASEAN fraternity and the Indonesian government towards the Tatmadaw as grey, suggesting that they legitimize and engage with brutal dictators rather than helping civil society in Myanmar. According to Tobing (2018), the concept of "ASEAN Way" which refers to a regional cooperation approach that emphasizes sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention has

become a factor that limits ASEAN's ability to reconcile and resolve humanitarian conflicts (Tobing, 2018).

Cross-border solidarity is another important element in the impact of the Milk Tea Alliance. This movement succeeded in creating solidarity among civil society, activists, and individuals in ASEAN countries involved in this movement (Schaffar, 2021). This solidarity transcends national and ethnic boundaries, creating strong bonds between individuals who share a common goal. This enables the exchange of experiences, strategies, and support that can strengthen pro-democracy movements in the ASEAN region.

The Milk Tea Alliance has also empowered civil society in ASEAN countries. Civil society is becoming more active in participating in the struggle for democracy and human rights. They feel they have a stronger voice and are better able to contribute to shaping the political and social direction of their country (Schaffar & Wongratanawin, 2021). The movement has changed the political dynamics in those countries by giving voice to people who previously may have felt marginalized or powerless.

The influence of the Milk Tea Alliance can also be seen in the foreign policies of several countries outside ASEAN that support this movement. Countries such as the United States and Taiwan have expressed their support for democracy and human rights in the ASEAN region (Kironska, 2021). This support creates diplomatic pressure on ASEAN countries to improve their human rights records and pay attention to democratic values.

However, the Milk Tea Alliance movement also faces challenges on its way. Several authoritarian-leaning governments in ASEAN have responded strongly to the movement, including repressive measures against activists and restrictions on freedom of speech (Reynaldi et al., 2023). Therefore, the struggle for democracy in the region continues, and the Milk Tea Alliance must continue to adapt and persevere in the face of these challenges.

CONCLUSION

The Milk Tea Alliance, which originated in the early part of 2020, has assumed a significant position within Southeast Asia by actively engaging with political processes that transcend national boundaries. Originating from the political unrest in Thailand, the movement has subsequently transformed into a representation of pro-democratic endeavors, actively promoting the need for political restructuring and transformation. The aforementioned movement effectively utilized social media platforms to generate widespread recognition on a global scale, fostering solidarity among civil society, activists, and citizens from various nations, particularly Hong Kong and Taiwan. Their collective objective centered around the pursuit of democratic principles and the safeguarding of human rights. The influence of this phenomenon encompassed the testing of established political conventions, particularly within the context of Hong Kong, with a notable emphasis on democratic principles, active public participation, and the safeguarding of freedom of expression. The ASEAN alliance facilitated the development of transnational unity, thereby exerting political influence on national governments and encouraging civil society to engage more actively in the promotion of democratic principles and human rights. Furthermore, it exerted an impact on foreign policies by placing significant

emphasis on democratic values. Nonetheless, the presence of government persecution presented substantial obstacles, impeding the ability to achieve efficient coordination and engage in action. In spite of the aforementioned challenges, the unwavering resolve of the Milk Tea Alliance, together with its global backing, holds the capacity to instigate substantial transformations in Southeast Asia. This aligns with the constructivist paradigm, which underscores the significance of reshaping international norms through social processes.

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