

Anti-Copyright



Southeast Asian anarchism

Notes from a denizen

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In the past thirty years, anarchism as well as implicitly anarchist practices have grown quite expansively in our region of the world

Anarchism in Southeast Asia was totally demobilized and almost eradicated after the sunset of classical anarchism before the Second World War. Across the world we are seeing an “anarchist turn” in radical politics today, in which anarchism has seen a resurgence and remobilization not seen since the time of classical anarchism. However, surveys and studies carried out to detail the various anarchist milieus have often overlooked a crucial region of the world, Southeast Asia. These brief notes will attempt to address the gap in the literature from a Southeast Asian perspective. I will specifically focus on recent history and contemporary situations.

Before re emergence in the 90s, there was virtually nothing. Punk subculture has been credited a mobiliser of anarchist milieus across various countries. This is indeed the case in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Burma, and Thailand. Like a barren land after a volcanic eruption, the land is first colonized by pioneer species which are small and simple like moss and fungi. Pioneers lay the groundwork for grass, then larger plants, then small fauna like bugs, then large fauna like birds, then even more complex life. Such is similar in a milieu. In this sense, punk paved the way for zines, affinity groups, then infoshops, then (one hopes) larger formations.

As it stands, the anarchist milieu in Java, Indonesia is the one that is the most variegated in ecological variety. We can see anarchist prisoner support, anarcho-syndicalism, anti-monarchist agitation in Yogyakarta, West Papua solidarity work, and anarcha-feminist organizing. There are also efforts to start a specifically anarchist organization of the especifista variety. Unique in Southeast Asia, the government of Indonesia specifically target anarchists in their repression of civil society. In effect, Indonesia has the most anarchist prisoners in Southeast Asia.

The Philippines also has a rich milieu. Anarchism here also emerged first with punk, zines, Food Not Bombs, and infoshops in the 1990s. My milieu sees itself as a new wave compared to the previous wave which emerged in the 90s. The older milieu wave excelled in infoshops, drug decriminalization advocacy, and deep ecology. The milieu I am a part of instead stresses anti-misogyny, anti-transmisogyny, police and prison abolition, anti-carceral feminism, and joyful militancy. As our younger milieu organized during the COVID-19 pandemic, the on-line aspect of our mobilization cannot be understated. New efforts are also abound for forwarding libertarian socialism within broad socialist formations.

What is curious about the Philippines and Indonesia is that while punk and anarchism mobilized at the same time, the milieu in Indonesia is quite larger and more variegated than in the Philippines despite their similar trajectories. One hypothesis is that Indonesia's communist movement was decimated during the genocide of the left, leaving a large vacuum of militancy that anarchism filled. Meanwhile, the Maoist and Marxist left in the Philippines remains quite active, so new militants gravitate towards what is already built. This hypothesis is consistent with previous theorisation that Marxist and anarchist mobilizations are inversely proportional, meaning if Marxism is highly organized, anarchism has less mobilization, and if Marxism is demobilized, anarchism has the potential for more mobilization. Indeed, the demobilization of the Maoist left in the Philippines in the 90s *did* coincide with a mobilization of anarchism around the same time, as did the global revival of anarchism since the fall of the old Soviet Union.

A broad support for the opposition

Like Indonesia and the Philippines, punk arrived in Malaysia in the 80s and 90s, following a zine culture. Like Indonesia, its communist movement was largely eradicated in a war called the Malayan Emergency. A 1984 censorship law, *Akta Mesin Cetak*, restricted and repressed the circulation of radical publications, but zine culture still continued. Coinciding with the Reformasi period, anarchist ideas coincided with a broader social movement towards social awareness that included anti-consumerism and boycotts.

Vietnam is one of the few so-called “actually existing socialist” countries and one of two in Southeast Asia. The first 21st century anarchist translations in tiếng Việt appeared on the Southeast Asian Anarchist Library, and soon after we began to see some theoretical critiques and articulations from this milieu. What is most celebrated by the broader international anarchist community is the Vietnamese anarchist critiques of state socialism/state capitalism. Of course, control over the national internet and policing in physical spaces makes organizing any opposition to the government there highly risky with very few rewards. This makes the nascent Vietnamese milieu there more “infrapolitical”, or whose politics is not seen visibly like one cannot see infrared light.

The anarchist milieu in Thailand is still quite new, but is already variegated, containing scenes like infoshops, Food Not Bombs, punks, and even a combative element. This combative element fights against the police and supports the broad anti-authoritarian liberal-democratic opposition to the monarchy and military. In

their own words, the anarchists in Thailand are still finding their footing, seeing themselves as relatively new in the country.

Before the civil war, Burma (Myanmar) had quite a small milieu with a mixture of Food Not Bombs and punks. But during the civil war, we have seen an effort to translate anarchist and libertarian Marxist texts alongside a broad support for the opposition to the junta. Apparently there were efforts to start an anarchist military unit, but was prevented from doing so. In the meantime, anarchists there mostly remain as civilians. As the civil war and revolution develops in Burma, we shall see how their situation plays out.

The Milk Tea Alliance is also worth examining. Starting as an internet meme, it has developed into networks of activists and citizen journalists across Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and Burma, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. They have a strong Southeast Asian component whose center of gravity is to support the revolution in Burma/Myanmar. While often anti-authoritarian but liberal-democratic in orientation, in practice they often organize in a decentralized and anarchistic way, often bringing to mind how the “anarchist turn” is often small-A or implicitly anarchist rather than explicitly so.

Those who follow my work know I am a librarian of the Southeast Asian Anarchist Library. I'm quite happy with its current direction and orientation. My intention for it to become a common site of memory, propaganda, and mobilization has largely come into fruition. Comrades sometimes send me the odd places where the symbols and QR codes of the library can be found.

Multiple aspects in Southeast Asian anarchism suggest a reliance on internet media technologies for mobilization. That anarchism reemerged in the 90s where internet technologies were emerging is no accident; likely international interactions facilitated anarchist dialogue and spread in the region. Indeed, our anarchist and abolitionist milieu in the Philippines relied heavily on online mobilization which eventually led to physical mobilizations later on. The Southeast Asian Anarchist Library was also a factor in helping libertarian-minded Vietnamese find each other. Similar so, the Milk Tea Alliance is also online-reliant and was able to leverage their online networks for physical mobilizations of solidarity.

Special thanks to Erin, Kon Zing, W—, and Han and who provided input for these notes! Keep an eye out for future developments!