Rapid globalization is an ambiguous process. It has been a major cause of fragmentation, widening economic disparities and violent conflict, but it has also spurred international institution building. Growing interdependence and cross-border problems have facilitated the emergence of an increasingly vertically and horizontally differentiated multi-layered system of global governance (Rüland 2010). Much of its growth has taken place at the regional level. As nation states sought to manage interdependence through the pooling of material resources, knowledge and even sovereignty, regional organizations have proliferated in the last two decades. Today, we find regional organizations in virtually every world region, even in regions that for a long time had been “regions without regionalism” (Aarts 1999). One inevitable consequence of this intensifying regional cooperation is that nation states outsource decision-making to the international arena. Crucial policy issues with far-reaching consequences for the living conditions of large segments of the population are therefore increasingly in the hands of arcane circles of experts and bureaucrats, who can no longer be effectively held accountable by the duly legitimated national representative bodies. The public resents this lack of transparency, which is exacerbated by the increasing technical complexity of many issues. It is the ground on which anti-regionalist populist movements and the search for alternative regionalisms thrive (Chandra 2009).

In order to mitigate their democracy deficit and to strengthen their legitimacy, many regional organizations – like international institutions in general – have created channels for civil society participation and parliamentary forums. One of the regional organizations that established such a body very early on is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).
Founded in 1967, ASEAN member states had already set up an ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Organization (AIPO) by 1977. In 2007, AIPO was re-named ASEAN-Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA). While in Asia other parliamentary networks such as the Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum (APPF) and the Asian Parliamentary Assembly (APA) also exist, AIPO/AIPA is the only forum associated with one of Asia’s numerous regional organizations. This chapter therefore focuses exclusively on AIPO/AIPA. It first contextualizes AIPO/AIPA in South-East Asia’s regionalism before, second, briefly outlining AIPO/AIPA’s organizational structure and working procedures. The main part of the chapter then concentrates, third, on the question of which functions AIPO/AIPA performs for regional integration in South-East Asia. I argue here that, firmly embedded in ASEAN’s state corporatist culture of interest representation, AIPO/AIPA has had only limited democratizing effects on South-East Asian regionalism. Without major reforms, its potential to help transform ASEAN from a largely state-centric and elitist organization into a people-centered grouping, which even ASEAN officials regard as crucial for increasing the association’s legitimacy, is thus likewise rather dim.

9.1. The regional context: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

ASEAN is Asia’s most established regional organization. Founded at the height of the Vietnam War and in the heyday of the domino theory, the formation of ASEAN was in the first place an anti-communist reassurance policy, should the US scale down, or even completely end, their military engagement in South-East Asia. However, such a policy could only be credible if the five founding members – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – were able to overcome their often-hostile relations as infamously exemplified in the Indonesian konfrontasi policy (1963–1966) against the Federation of Malaysia (Ba 2009). Solving neighborly disputes peacefully thus became another important motivation for the formation of a South-East Asian regional organization, as stated in the grouping’s founding document, the Bangkok Declaration. Although initially progress in regional cooperation was slow, over time ASEAN gradually developed a corpus of cooperation norms known as the ASEAN Way. Most of these norms were laid down in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a regional code of conduct, signed at the grouping’s first summit held in Bali in February 1976. The ASEAN Way mainly stresses classical Westphalian sovereignty norms, such as non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, territorial integrity and equality, in addition to the renunciation of force and the settlement of differences through peaceful means (Haacke 2003: 1). Besides these core norms, practical cooperation experiences have socialized political decision-makers in a set of secondary norms, such as informality, flexibility and pragmatism,