Over four and a half decades, ASEAN has developed into a multifaceted institution positioned as pivotal in East Asian regionalism. It has fostered a regulatory framework directed toward building the region’s economic competitiveness, and widened the scope of its activities beyond customary economic and security concerns into a range of issues, including human rights. Alongside the intensification of this political project, Southeast Asian CSOs have revived after the harsh repression of the left during the Cold War. This reformation has occurred on the back of the region’s economic expansion, which has recast CSOs’ complexion from the pursuit of radical socio-political transformation to the more limited goals of protecting individual rights and collective goods. CSOs have increasingly regionalized their activities, and made ASEAN a target of their advocacy in response to the Association’s reform agenda. This chapter charts these developments in ASEAN and Southeast Asian associational life.

In describing these interrelated trends, the approach adopted here is distinct from mainstream IR studies of regionalism. The methodological nationalism of these approaches positions the unitary, independent and coherent state as the starting point for analysis, overlooking the role of domestic political struggles in shaping regionalism. Mainstream IR studies of regionalism emphasize external considerations over domestic political imperatives, framing regionalism as a response by rational governments to economic or security concerns. This approach consequently casts over the range of other factors that determine regionalism, such as competing domestic coalitions and transnational production networks, failing to recognize regional integration as a deeply political process (Jayasuriya 2003a).
As outlined in Chapter 2, this study understands ASEAN’s form and trajectory as shaped by conflicts between competing social forces that seek to privilege their interests at the expense of others’. Accordingly, it is the prevailing social forces across the region that shape ASEAN’s development. These forces in turn may be shaped by external imperatives, such as downturns in global markets or competition arising from economic integration in other regions. However, this approach frames ASEAN’s development not as defined solely by external imperatives. Hameiri underscores the value of this approach, asserting that the links between the regionalism literature and other studies, particularly in state theory and political geography, have been overlooked. However, state-building and regionalism are often part of the same political project, namely the “spatial and institutional organization of political rule” (Hameiri 2013, p. 320). As argued by Jessop, state borders do not “constitute a fixed horizon for emergent state projects: there is no more reason to rule out strategies aiming to build multi- and transnational networks and circuits of state power than there is to exclude local or regional state projects” (1990, p. 9). Hence, the approach adopted here recognizes that the form and trajectory of regional integration is interwoven with domestic political projects.

This chapter describes developments in regionalism and Southeast Asian associational life across three periods. First, it outlines ASEAN’s establishment, describing its foundation as an attempt by political elites to consolidate capitalist state-building projects and undermine communist insurgencies. With political elites attempting to bolster their power by undermining the left, and these endeavors receiving Western support as Cold War tensions escalated, associational life across ASEAN’s founding states was curbed. These states’ interventions in conflicts in Indochina contributed to the development of authoritarian “socialism” in the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) countries where associational life was organized according to state directives, largely through mass organizations.

Second, the chapter describes ASEAN’s evolution in the post-Cold War period, and the shifting circumstances of associational life. Rapid influxes of foreign direction investment (FDI) fueled economic growth in Southeast Asia. The boom decade from the mid-1980s was facilitated through the reconstitution of political regimes’ engagement with global markets from commodity trade to manufacturing, and the enmeshing of domestic cartels and political structures. Market transitions in Indochina saw political elites increasingly tolerate service provision CSOs, while