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**Published in:**  
Social Movement Studies

**Published:** 01/01/2023

**Document Version:**  
Final Published version, also known as Publisher's PDF, Publisher's Final version or Version of Record

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**Publication record in CityU Scholars:**  
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**Published version (DOI):**  
[10.1080/14742837.2023.2236032](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2023.2236032)

**Publication details:**  
Cheng, E. W., & Lee, F. L. F. (2023). Hybrid protest logics and relational dynamics against institutional decay: networked movements in Asia. *Social Movement Studies*, 22(5-6), 607–627.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2023.2236032>

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To cite this article: Edmund W. Cheng & Francis L.F. Lee (2023) Hybrid protest logics and relational dynamics against institutional decay: networked movements in Asia, Social Movement Studies, 22:5-6, 607-627, DOI: [10.1080/14742837.2023.2236032](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2023.2236032)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2023.2236032>



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Published online: 16 Jul 2023.



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## Hybrid protest logics and relational dynamics against institutional decay: networked movements in Asia

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### ABSTRACT

This introductory essay surveys a wave of mass movements in contemporary East and Southeast Asia. We identify three main aspects that drove and sustained this wave of societal pushback amidst institutional decay. We first discuss how democratic backsliding shapes the spread of mass mobilization in polities that are seen as regulated by the interest of power elites and their machinery of coercion and adaptation. We then critically examine the continued relevance of protest leadership by highlighting the relational dynamics between organizing with and without (formal) organizations. We further examine how network and coalition building in political and civil societies shaped the long-term trajectory of movement organizations to facilitate large-scale protests at critical times. This review draws on the contributions to this special issue and the recent literature on democratic backsliding and political activism. It provides a holistic survey of defensive mobilizations and the interactive mechanisms among the masses in the region and beyond.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 March 2022

Accepted 10 July 2023

### KEYWORDS

Social movements;  
democratic backsliding;  
protest leadership; relational  
dynamics; East Asia;  
Southeast Asia

In the past decade, mass movements erupted one after another in different parts of the world. East and Southeast Asia witnessed their fair share of phenomenal movements, such as the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, the 2016 candlelight vigil in South Korea, the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in Hong Kong, the Berisha rallies in Malaysia in the 2010s, and the anti-incumbent protests in Indonesia in 2019, Thailand in 2020, and Myanmar in 2021. In addition to mass protests, political activism has re-emerged in countries with competitive elections (e.g., Japan, the Philippines), transitioned to the digital sphere (e.g., China, Vietnam), or forged new coalitions among political parties and civil society organizations (e.g., Malaysia, Thailand). Furthermore, these movements triggered a series of intended and unintended consequences, ranging from the opposition's unprecedented electoral victories to the incumbent's systemic institutional overhauls.

Therefore, it is safe to say that mass mobilizations have significantly shaped the political processes and social imaginations in the region. The traditional focus on socio-ethnic cleavages, power elite coalitions, and mechanisms of coercive or adaptive

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governance (Fewsmith & Nathan, 2019; Sidel, 2012, 2012), while important, is insufficient for revealing the region's changing dynamics of state-society relations (Hung, 2022; McCargo, 2019; Weiss, 2020). Due to the rise of new political actors and the networked nature of digital communication, East and Southeast Asia witnessed an upsurge of mass protests to push back against the tide of increased state control.

This special issue examines a wave of defensive, urban-centred, and decentralized mobilization in East and Southeast Asia that has been under-conceptualized. This article not only introduces the special issue, but also seeks to provide a general survey of the changing dynamics of popular movements in the region and to start bridging the study of democratic backsliding and social movements.

### **The state of activism in Asia**

Revolts, insurgencies, wars, and movements have generated a significant body of literature that provides a conceptual and contextual understanding of the Asian Archipelago. However, the prevailing studies on East and Southeast Asian activism also differ considerably in terms of the structure, space, and unit of analysis from the studies of contentious politics and social movements in the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East and Africa. The former studies tend to focus on how nationalist movements, ethnic conflicts, and peasant insurgencies have developed and yet interlocked in the power structure of the hybrid and authoritarian regimes. They suggest that the central elites and the local bosses, who collaborated and sought power through post-war nation-building, have been resilient and cohesive enough to suppress, co-opt, attrite or ignore these discontents and mobilizations (Cai, 2010; Chen, 2012; Yuen & Cheng, 2017).

In this conceptual lens, the Cold War international order served as the overarching analytical structure to understand not only why social movements emerge but also what kinds of social movements are worth studying (Vu, 2006). World system theorists are drawn to examine the various forms of insurgencies, counterinsurgencies and interwar conflicts in Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam, in which the Western imperial powers were the key players or antagonists (Hunt, 2008; Opper, 2019). Area specialists are more interested in the covert and rural resistance that has not been supplanted by modern nation-states. They have identified protest forms and repertoires that are deeply rooted in local political cultures and social relations (O'Brien & Li, 2006; Scott, 1985).

The third-wave democratization and the post-Soviet world order gave rise to a new conceptualization of popular mobilizations in the region. In particular, the mass movements in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea in 1980, the People's Power Revolution in the Philippines in 1986, the Tiananmen Movement in China in 1989, the Wild Lily Movement in Taiwan in 1990, and Black May in Thailand in 1992 were widely studied. However, these movements are often seen as the backdrop of democratic transition or its failure. Except for South Korea and Taiwan, where protests continue to occur and shape politics, large-scale social movements largely disappeared in many hybrid regimes or electoral democracies, including the Philippines, Thailand, and China until recently.

Subject to these empirical developments, the literature has become less interested in the recruitment and dynamics of social movements but has focused on the institutional mechanisms that hindered their occurrence and undermined their impacts (Nathan,

2003; Ong, 2022). In other words, while sociopolitical grievances persisted, they did not result in strong collective actions that posed effective challenges to the incumbents. In Hong Kong, this kind of administrative absorption of politics was formalized through a consultative model that incorporated corporative interests, partial elections and the rule of law (Ma, 2007). In Mainland China, adaptive and coercive institutions have been developed to allow certain contentious signals to surface while preventing them from evolving into cross-sectoral or intercity mobilizations (Teets, 2013; King et al, 2013). In Southeast Asian nations, an evident dualistic dynamic is characterized by the development of party-machinery and patron-clientelism on the one hand, and the manipulation of ethno-cultural divisions through elections on the other (Callahan, 2018; McCargo, 2019; Sidel, 2008).

The 2010s, however, demonstrated the power of popular movements in challenging these seemingly resilient systems (Weiss, 2020; Xu & He, 2022), whether authoritarian, ostensibly democratic, or a hybrid of the two. In some regimes where these mass protests erupted, incumbents have been in power for decades without facing severe challenges. They have tight control of the state apparatus and civil society, making it difficult for political opportunities to emerge. In others, ballot boxes have maintained a veneer of democracy, shielding rampant cronyism and corruption. The substantial level of plurality observed in the region serves as a crucial foundation for theoretical and empirical explorations through a comparative lens. Scholars have engaged in an ongoing endeavour to generalize Asian experiences into theories of democratization and social movements (Aspinall et al., 2022; Fu, 2018; Morgenbesser & Pepinsky, 2019) to survey the ebbs and flows of contention and control in the digital age that have been initiated by new social configurations and are subject to increased geopolitical tensions (Lee & Chan, 2018; Ong, 2022; Hung, 2022). Situated within this scholarly landscape, this special issue is positioned as part of these new efforts. We reveal the hybrid protest logics in mobilizing and organizing cross-sectoral participation to defend against institutional decay in the region.

### **The defensive and networked mobilization of the masses**

Specifically, this special issue highlights the defensive logic of social mobilization in East and Southeast Asia during the 2010s. Unlike social movements during the third and fourth waves of democratization in the 1980s in Eastern Europe and the Middle East in the 2010s, this new wave of protests tends to have the modest aim of resisting institutional decay rather than promoting regime transition (Maerz et al., 2020). Furthermore, these protests are not primarily driven by redistributive justice and anti-austerity claims that predominate the protests in Western and Southern Europe (Giugni & Grasso, 2016). In contrast, new political agencies pushed back against the tide of backsliding to preserve certain institutional rules or norms – be it the rule of law, civil liberties, competitive elections, or parliamentary oversight (Caraway & Ford, 2020; Thompson, 2021). Their objective was to stop the situation from becoming worse before making it better, which resonates with other ‘defensive mobilization’ in other consolidating democracies in Latin America or newly industrialized economies in Asia (Almeida, 2007; Lee & Chan, 2011).

The emergence of these defensive movements is particularly remarkable when the increasingly restrictive political environment across these regimes is considered.

Throughout the ongoing trajectory of democratic backsliding, incumbents often employ a range of coercive tactics, such as banning civil society organizations, imprisoning activists, and attacking the mass media (Lorch, 2021; Mert & Deniz Erkmen, 2020). Moreover, by bending or changing the rules of the game, these incumbents typically make institutional arenas less competitive and more exclusive. As a result, formal opposition is often weakened, making it difficult for organizations to deliver on promises, preserve authority, and mobilize the citizenry. Therefore, this wave of defensive mobilization is usually driven by institutional distrust among the masses (Gulliver et al., 2023). As the intermediaries between political parties and social movement organizations (SMOs) were deprived of their space and authority to lead the mass mobilization, protest goals and dynamics also changed. Pact-making with incumbents and bargaining among organized movement groups, which are seen as crucial in the political transitions in Latin America in the 1980s and Tunisia and Egypt in the 2010s, are not accessible to their civil society actors and do not form the priorities of the massive contingency (Ketchley, 2017; Plaetzer, 2014).

Because of the contraction in formal institutions and centralized leadership, this type of defensive mobilization was largely guided by the interactions among the masses, from which spontaneous mobilizations arose with little planning (Abrams, 2023; Fu, 2018). The masses here are defined as common people who have little regular and institutional access to political power. They interact with what movement scholars call positive feedback between early risers and latecomers (Cf. Biggs, 2003; Pearlman, 2021). On the one hand, the early risers relied on their social networks and social media to mobilize their peers and bystanders to install a sense of the increasing return of political participation. This *mobilizing structure* in decentralized protests resembles a typical story of digital activism. On the other hand, the primarily reformist claims of the defensive movements were often accompanied by radical tactics. However, this tactical radicalization often did not alienate their popular support. This *organizing logic*, which illustrates solidarity among the masses, presents a puzzle that cannot be adequately explained by the personalization of politics.

Hence, instead of assuming that this wave of mass mobilization would fit into the ideal-typical 'network movements' or 'connective actions' articulated by authors such as Castells (2012) and Bennett and Segerberg (2013), it is more fruitful to draw on comparative and empirical evidence to unpack the interactive mechanisms that mobilize and sustain this wave of mass movements in Asia, with and without formal organizations. This special issue uses the term networked movement in a broad sense, denoting mass movements and online activism not centered on hierarchical and formal organizations but relying on the formation of decentralized networks among multiple actors and groups, often with the aid of digital technologies. In their defence against systemic decay that is perceived to be unregulated in formal institutions and brokered by power elites, informal networks and grassroots actors serve more prominent and influential roles.

Indeed, no matter how seemingly powerful digitally enabled activism can be, movement organizations and activist experiences remain crucial in many apparently leaderless movements (Flesher Fominaya, 2020; Tufekci, 2017). The organizing logics of issue framing, action coordination, and solidarity building – goes beyond the act of mobilizing people to move into the streets. In some cases, protest campaigns can have recognized

organizational leaders, yet bottom-up mobilization can intervene to shape protest dynamics and outcomes (Lee & Chan, 2018; Pearlman, 2021). In other cases, unaffiliated citizens (Klandermans et al., 2014) established ‘partial organizations’ or ‘event coalitions’ that took up leadership tasks (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Staggenborg, 2015).

Common to many post-Occupy movements was the abandonment of spatial occupation in favour of more fluid modes of mobilization and more compact online – offline interactions. When protesters learn from past experiences, they become more adaptive to new organizational forms and coordination through digital platforms (Hsiao, 2021; Zhu et al., 2022). It is in this regard that the notion of leaderlessness is contested. Gerbaudo (2017) contends that social media teams function as digital vanguards within protests, emphasizing their role in shaping and guiding the dynamics of these movements. In this special issue, Liang and Lee’s (2023) article reveals that opinion leadership plays a crucial role by providing individuals with discursive resources and collective identities in framing threats and opportunities. As such, this organizing logic goes beyond treating resources as static (Clemens & Minkoff, 2004) to understanding them as an interactive field, in which the hybridity of organizational forms and discursive capitals facilitate and sustain collective actions (Goldstone, 2004).

Echoing this perspective, the following pages identify three relational dynamics – at the structural, organizational, and communicative levels – that changed the contours of networked movements in Asia. This approach situates popular movements against the regional trend of democratic backsliding. It explores how the challenging tasks of organizing protests were made possible through the interception of partial organizations, social identities, and opinion leaders. It traces the political interactions between state and social actors in a longer time frame. For these purposes, we draw upon articles in the current special issue and the burgeoning literature on networked movements in the region.

### **Pushback against democratic backsliding**

The current issue includes studies in a wide range of political regimes. This partly reflects the characteristics of East and Southeast Asia and partly results from our deliberate attempt to examine networked movements in authoritarian, hybrid, and democratic systems. The first relational field takes place at the macro level: the relative strength of the incumbent and the organized opposition. Many cases in this special issue concern deepening autocratization that weakened the capacity of institutional opposition and deprived it of gatekeeper functions over radical claims and repertoires. When concerns about the lack of institutional oversight spill over to the populace, individuals and groups become more likely to act collectively to protect existing rights and freedoms (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001). Institutional opportunities and perceived threats then shape the form and extent of pushback in different regimes.

We begin with the authoritarian state of China. Many scholars have noted the rise of contentious politics in mainland China in the 2000s. Lei (2018), for instance, pointed towards the formation of a counter-public sphere in China during the Hu-Wen administration, when the legal profession, the media, the internet, and civil society actors combined to generate a significant amount of contentious politics. The development of digital platforms, especially social media such as Weibo, has led to contentious online



events (Yang, 2009). However, since the early 2010s, the state has tightened its control of society. The relative autonomy enjoyed by the media and the legal profession was undermined, and civil society actors faced an increasingly hostile environment. In response, the characteristics of political contention changed. Fu (2018) described how political contention has become atomized in contemporary China, where social organizations adopted a more covert approach to train citizens to fight for their rights on an individual basis.

Similarly, Egreteau's (2023) profile article in this special issue discusses the ways in which a combination of threats and opportunities could galvanize defensive mobilization. In light of the military coup in 2021 that ended the power-sharing model between the military junta and opposition parties, the citizenry did not submit to the new order and practise nonviolent resistance as they had before. In contrast, a new generation of Burmese activists experimented with gendered strategies and diversified repertoires. His insightful analysis suggests that the hybridization of protest repertoires is derived from the closing of institutional opportunities, a collective memory of past cycles of protest, and new opportunities from digital media for protesters to learn, borrow and adapt tools from global social movements.

Within this context, one may argue that the individualized character of online activism in China and the civil war in Myanmar resulted from state suppression of organized resistance. To avoid political risks, netizens often wait for signals from official media regarding whether the state will tolerate criticism on a certain matter. Similarly, in a study of the diffusion of the #MeToo campaign in China, Zeng (2020) argued that, given tight control of social organizations and the media, 'new communication technologies serve as a critical, and sometimes sole, conduit through which activists can organize both online and offline activities' (p. 175). Flexible personal action frames are needed not only because their symbolic openness and inclusiveness can facilitate mass participation but also because a unified frame can be an easy target for state suppression. Zeng (2020) went on to illustrate how individuals used the tactics of caching and camouflage to avoid censorship. The detour towards digital activism serves as a strategy to mitigate platform censorship and political risk in authoritarian contexts.

At the other end of the spectrum are relatively stable democracies such as those of Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. Under these regimes, citizens' right to organize social movements and engage in political participation is well protected. However, this does not necessarily mean that social mobilization is strongest when a regime is highly democratic. Ho's (2023) article in this special issue explores the dynamics between anti-nuclear and pro-nuclear movements in Taiwan. His relational analysis adds nuance to the picture by showcasing how political opportunities in the formal political arena could shape the interactions between a movement and its countermovement. After the Fukushima accident in Japan in 2011, public concerns regarding nuclear safety increased, and the anti-nuclear movement soon gained access to formal political institutions. The pro-nuclear activists relied on formal political channels instead of public protests to put forwards their claims, which allowed them to appropriate protests to persuade the public.

In contrast, Jung's (2023) article in this special issue analyses the Korean candlelight vigil, which lasted for months from 2016 to 2017 without anyone claiming leadership. The article concerns the ways in which a combination of political opportunities and threats can galvanize bottom-up mobilization because of weakened democratic



institutions. As Jung reviewed, Korean political scientists identified the concentration of power into the presidency, the winner-take-all electoral system, and a weak party system as institutional defects in Korean democracy. Combined with growing levels of inequality and declining upwards mobility, grievances accumulated over the years, sowing the seeds for the anti-government protests in 2016.

Notably, in democratic countries where institutional constraints on protest activities are weak, political cultures may play a larger role in determining the capacity of bottom-up mobilization. Jenkins (2020) examined whether context matters in the logic of connective action. A key in the logic of connective action is mobilization through personal, weak-tie networks, but Jenkins proposed that the impact of protest appeals depends on political culture. A comparative analysis of survey experiments conducted in Japan and South Korea shows that protest appeals through weak ties indeed have a more substantial impact in Korea, where protest is generally accepted by the public, than in Japan, where people tend to see protests in a more negative light.

Between countries that approach prototypical authoritarian and democratic systems, the region has a range of hybrid regimes where democratic institutions and civil liberties coexist with a significant amount of illiberal or undemocratic elements. While state power and oppositional strength are not always a zero-sum game in the long-term view, democratic backsliding often weakens organized resistance and provokes the emergence of new movement forms and repertoires.

Ma and Cheng (2023), in this special issue, adopt a framing analysis of the online petitions of professional sectors in Hong Kong to illustrate this point. Although middle-class professionals were no strangers to Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, their actions had been confined to institutional means and individual capacity. However, the threats imposed by the extradition bill triggered the territory-wide and cross-sector involvement of professional groups. When professionals felt the need to defend fading civil liberties, professional associations that had been dependent on the state quickly activated and transformed into movement networks. Threats towards the integrity of a political system can capitalize on existing professional and social ties and enhance the development of networked movements in hybrid regimes.

However, the presence of significant pushback cannot be taken for granted. In the current issue, T. L. Caraway (2023) examines why the labour movement in Indonesia became much less effective after Jokowi came to power in 2014. She notes that Indonesia's labour movement, despite its structural weaknesses, had been capable of forcing concessions by the government prior to the mid-2010s. While acknowledging that the factionalization, oligarchization, and low membership density of Indonesia's labour organizations constituted the conditions for the reversal of fortune in 2014, she attributed the trajectory mainly to executive aggrandizement, which included the assembling of a majority coalition by hardball tactics and the suppression of civil society through both preemptive and punitive measures. This analysis highlights how democratic backsliding could disorganize civil society and effectively undermine organized opposition.

Various factors may influence the degree and characteristics of pushback against backsliding. Thompson (2021) compared pushback against democratic backsliding in Thailand and the Philippines. He noted that the two countries had taken different routes towards autocratization. Thailand was a case of a promissory coup, where military

intervention was undertaken in the name of defending democracy. Thailand's military-monarchical regime failed to convince the public of the democratic character of the election. Coupled with the declining legitimacy of the monarchy, a broad civilian alliance against military-monarchical rule emerged. However, the pushback remained contoured by preordained state-society relations, where civil society organizations lacked autonomy and could not act as an effective challenge to the power elites (Lorch, 2021). Thai youth activists soon took up a decentralized formation in their anti-government protests. In contrast, the Philippines involved a case of executive aggrandizement, where elected executives gradually weakened checks on their power in a seemingly constitutional manner. The Philippines under Duterte, like Malaysia after the Bersih rallies, thus featured a form of institutional absorption of movement momentum, which contributed to a weaker pushback than that of Thailand (Cf. Case, 2011; Ong, 2022).

This literature on democratic backsliding and pushback thus elucidates the pathways towards defensive mobilization in Asia. The most prevalent pathway is autocratization without strong pushback, resulting in digital activism or institutional contestation. This has occurred when autocratizing regimes manage to build coalitions with revered institutions embedded in Asian society. These revered institutions may include ethnic groups in Malaysia, religious associations in Indonesia, local bosses in the Philippines, and court systems in Hong Kong (Croissant & Völkel, 2012; Yuen & Cheng, 2017). An alternative pathway is autocratization with strong pushback, triggering eventful protests and territory-wide civil unrest. This occurs when regimes' political legitimacy is fading and threats to institutional integrity provoke citizens to organize themselves collectively, as in South Korea in 2016, Hong Kong in 2019, Thailand in 2020, and Myanmar in 2021.

### **Continued relevance of movement leadership**

Much discussion about the transformation of social movements since the beginning of the millennium has focused on the declining role of SMOs. Formal and hierarchical SMOs are traditionally responsible for pooling resources, devising strategies and tactics, organizing collective actions, constructing collective action frames, and negotiating with power holders. However, digital technologies have seemingly provided a means for people to organize without organization (Shirky, 2008). Emerging from the new technological environment, this kind of social movement is often described as horizontal, decentralized, and leaderless.

Notably, the presence or absence of movement organizations and protest leadership are interrelated yet distinct issues. Networks of organizations constitute many movements without a designated leader. According to T. L. Caraway's (2023) article in this special issue, the Indonesian labour movement has long been 'organizationally divided' and 'profoundly fragmented' (p. 2), relying on ad hoc and semi-institutionalized networks of unions formed at the local level to unite workers. Another case in point is the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) in Hong Kong, the main organizer of the annual July 1 pro-democracy protests between 2003 and 2019. The CHRF was only a loose coalition of civil society associations, and its internal structural weaknesses prevented the CHRF from taking up more effective leadership in the city's pro-democracy movement (Lee & Chan, 2011). Therefore, we may also consider the question of organization and the question of leadership separately.

As noted earlier, despite the possibility of bottom-up coordination of actions by ordinary people, movement organizations are still present in the field and can be crucial for forming a network of networks (Castells, 2012). The 2019 Anti-ELAB movement is a case in point. Lee's (2023) analysis of diaspora mobilization, and, in this special issue, Ma and Cheng's (2023) analysis of professional activism and Yuen and Tang's (2023) analysis of student activism, reveal that institutional capital, social ties, and mass media constitute an indispensable part of the networked movement. Yuen and Tang (2023), in particular, argue that contemporary networked movements have 'created different forms of organizations that are more ad hoc and flexible, and that have more hybrid forms that span both online and offline spaces' (p. 17).

Gromping and Sinpeng (2018) made a similar point. Examining two Facebook pages during Thailand's anti-government protests in 2013 and 2014 that represented the organizational brokerage and crowd-enabled functions, respectively, they found agenda alignment between the two. They argued that alignment occurred because high-stakes contention foregrounded instrumental motivations instead of the actualizing motivations behind bottom-up mobilization. In addition, crowd-enabled collectives recognize that the resources to sustain large-scale protests are held by traditional movement organizations. Hence, they align their agendas with movement organizations to make victory more likely.

Ho's (2019) discussion of improvisation during Taiwan's Sunflower Movement provided another example of how organizational leaders and online networks may work for each other. When the movement leaders were 'trapped' inside the occupied Legislative Yuan and cut off from protests on the street, protesters improvised by replicating past solutions, adapting past solutions to new situations, and developing new solutions to address new needs. Such situational awareness sustained the protests on the street and gave the occupiers continuous support.

However, the relationship between existing organizations and informal networks is only sometimes congenial. After all, part of the driving force behind new forms of activism is distrust of established institutions and elites, and people can regard traditional movement organizations as part of the untrustworthy establishment. In addition, demand for internal democracy and criticisms against the bureaucratism of movement leadership have been persistent phenomena. All of these can lead to tensions and conflicts. Lee and Chan (2018) argued that in the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, digitally enabled connective action empowered the movement by facilitating mass participation and introduced forces of decentralization that hampered the movement leadership's capability of negotiating with the government and steering the movement.

Therefore, which factors can shape the interactions between organizing with and without organizations constitutes an important research question. One factor singled out by existing research is the preexisting levels of solidarity or distrust among movement participants and organizational actors (Ho, 2019; Lee & Chan, 2018). Another factor may be the extent to which the goals of movement organizations and actors emerging from bottom-up mobilization are aligned and whether they recognize each other as holding the strategic resources needed to pursue common goals (Sinpeng, 2020; Lee, 2023).

However, another factor could involve how movement organizations position themselves. In the current issue, Jung (2023) highlights the role of both online mobilization and the formation of Action for Resignation by more than 1,500 civic groups in the

candlelight protests in South Korea. Jung notes that ‘the Action for Resignation was so prudent as to identify itself as a supporting, not a leading agency for the weekly protests.’ They provided infrastructural and logistical support that allowed the protests to diffuse without claiming leadership. Such self-restraint by movement organizations can also be observed in the case of the CHRF during Hong Kong’s Anti-ELAB Movement (Cheng et al., 2022). Under coordinated movement leadership, moderate participants could exert influence on the more radical actors. This self-restraint by movement organizations was partly the result of an awareness of the delicacy involved in the question of movement leadership and partly the result of the simple fact that movement organizations found it difficult to steer the whole movement when informal networks were prominent.

The term ‘leaderless’ has often been invoked in academic and journalistic discourses surrounding contemporary protests. However, even when centralized leadership is absent, there could be particularly influential figures in seemingly decentralized campaigns. During the Arab Spring, the role of internet activist Wael Ghonim was widely recognized. Wendy Pearlman’s (2021) and Clarke Killian and Korhan Kocak’s (2020) recent studies highlighted the role of ‘early risers’ and ‘first movers’ in organizing protests in autocratizing regimes. Although opportunities may be scarce or imperceptible under these regimes, SMOs and activists can create new opportunities by taking political risks to step up. Lin and Zhang (2018) noted the significance of event entrepreneurs in China’s dispersed and event-based contentious actions. Daphi and Zimmermann (2021) showed impacts of past movements on later activism are shaped by memories of the past movement, through which activists deliberately adopt or reject the characteristics and accounts of a distant past.

Moreover, across a networked movement, participants do not have equal influence because social, cultural, and economic capital is not evenly distributed. Ho (2019) noted that experienced activists led the improvisation efforts during the Sunflower Movement. As many people can play influential roles, leadership becomes diffused and fragmented. Even high-profile activists may not enjoy the authority to make compelling decisions; they often need to depend on informal spaces or improvised networks to coordinate frames and actions in light of censorship and control in authoritarian regimes (Gallagher & Miller, 2021; Mathieu, 2021).

Who are the influential agents, and what mediates leadership in networked social movements? Liao et al. (2020), through a comparison between social movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan, developed what they called the logic of communitive action. One distinguishing characteristic of communitive action is the emergence of a new type of leader who is capable of operating effectively on digital platforms. However, technological expertise is likely to be only one of a wide range of resources or abilities that make one individual or group more influential than others. Yuen and Tang’s (2023) article in this issue reveal that, among high schools in Hong Kong, elite schools had a higher level of influence and mobilization capacity during the Anti-ELAB Movement because of the schools’ reputation, alumni networks, and joint-school ties (in addition to the elite students’ cultural and linguistic capital).

Nevertheless, bottom-up mobilization may indeed lead to the democratization of leadership in the sense that a broader range of ordinary people has the chance to become what scholars have called ‘crowd-enabled elites’ (Shahin et al., 2021) or ‘networked microcelebrities’ (Tufekci, 2013). This point was noted in Liang and Lee’s (2023) article

in this special issue, which examines what makes some people particularly influential in an online forum during a protest movement. They find that user characteristics, the content of posts, and the logic of attention competition all explain user influence. However, opinion leadership is somewhat unstable – very few individual users can act as opinion leaders for a sustained period (Lee & Fong, 2021). Such findings illustrate that the distinctiveness of networked movements may not reside in the absence of leadership, but in the basis and stability of leadership.

Although not addressing the question of leadership directly, Choi's (2023) article in this special issue adds a gender perspective to studying networked social movements. She finds that, in the case of the Anti-ELAB Movement, the absence of central organizers allowed women protesters to cross the boundaries of conventional gender roles. When women protesters joined the 'frontline,' some chose to conform to conventional gender conceptions by taking up the less risky and confrontational tasks, yet others gained confidence and peer support and started taking up tasks usually seen as masculine. Her analysis thus hints at how conventional hierarchies – in her case the gender hierarchy – can be renegotiated in a decentralized networked movement.

As different types of leaders coexist in a networked movement, it is meaningful to examine their varying roles. Liu and Liu (2023), in this special issue, examine emotional contagion in online activism in China. Their network analysis of Weibo communication during a kindergarten scandal found that the state media played the role of a broadcaster. They set the agenda and indicate to netizens that the state would allow criticism on the matter. However, the content produced by media tended to be emotionally neutral. Groups of celebrities and microcelebrities acted as emotion initiators and emotion brokers, respectively.

In brief, movement leadership has not faded away in contemporary networked movements. Instead, democratic backsliding has circumscribed the institutional space of formal movement organizations, giving rise to a more fluid understanding of mobilizing and organizing structures. Compared to traditional SMOs, partial organizations and ad hoc networks are less formalized, less stable, more event-induced, and more task-improvised. Nevertheless, movement leadership is not entirely random or contingent. Early risers, opinion influencers, and emotion brokers earn their legitimacy and authority by taking political risks or resolving the challenges of organizing movements. During this process, social ties, cultural capital, and digital expertise often mediate their roles and explain why some networked movements in this issue are better organized and more sustainable than others.

### **Looking beyond the contentious moments**

While the previous section highlights the relationship between movement organizations and digital networks, researchers have argued for studying contemporary movements as parts of broader interactional dynamics over time (Tarrow, 2022). In an analysis of the Bali Rejects Reclamation movement in Indonesia, Bräuchler (2020) acknowledged that social media helped mobilize people and speed up the circulation of core symbols. However, social media communication only constituted 'a cog in the wheel': "only [the symbols'] strategic adoption and embedding into local contexts, identity politics and local agency generates solidarity and

legitimization” (p. 635). Gillian (2020) proposed that interactions between vectors often carry ideas and action orientations into a range of social settings over a period of time. The apprehension of temporality helps to include ‘both durable patterns of interaction and the events which often serve to make social change visible’ (p. 519).

One may analyse the evolution of networked movements from a relational perspective. In this special issue, both Ho (2023) and Thompson and Cheng (2023) explicitly adopt a relational approach. In a relational approach, a social movement is seen as a process that unfolds as agents interact with and respond to each other (della Porta, 2015). Specifically, Alimi et al. (2012) differentiated among four arenas of interaction: interaction between the movement and the larger social environment, interaction between the movement and the state apparatuses, interaction between the movement and the countermovement, and interaction within the movement. The evolution of a protest movement can be analysed by examining the interaction dynamics within and between these four arenas.

Within this framework, interactions between movement organizations and online networks can be considered integral to intramovement interactions. In addition, the emergence of online networks could affect how the movement at large interacts with the state, the countermovement, or the environment. For example, it has already been noted that the emergence of digitally enabled connective action made it more difficult for protest leaders and the government to negotiate during the Umbrella Movement (Lee & Chan, 2018). In the Anti-ELAB Movement, the absence of centralized leadership also made it difficult for the government to identify representatives to engage in negotiation. Lai and Sing (2020) opined that ‘such [decentralized] protests might be more likely to morph into a stalemate or an uncompromising, all-out confrontation,’ prompting the government to ‘engage in either a strategy of attrition or an all-out attempt to crush the protests’ (p. 63).

In addition to considering interactions in multiple arenas, we need to extend our focus temporally. Liu (2017) has argued that many studies about contentious politics in China tend to focus on the ‘moments of madness’, i.e., key events and incidents capturing the public’s attention. The same critique of a bias towards the ‘moment’ instead of the ‘movement’ can undoubtedly be applied to studies beyond China. This focus leads to a restricted view because it ‘leaves out a great deal of what is politically significant that sets the scene for the moment of confrontation’ (p. 420). This could affect our ability to understand what links the peaks of mobilization together.

Taylor’s (1989) concept of movement abeyance has been key to understanding movement continuity. When facing a hostile environment, activists turn their attention inwards and use preservatory tactics to maintain their values, identity, and networks. Liu (2017) called for more studies about everyday behaviour in the Chinese context, including mundane digital media use, mundane experience, and mundane expression. More closely related to the present issue, decentralized online networking among movement supporters may play a role in the abeyance process. In a survey study of university students in Hong Kong conducted in early 2019, months before the Anti-ELAB protests, Lee et al. (2020) showed that frequent political communication via social media was related to a more positive evaluation of the Umbrella Movement, while the connection with political actors via social media was related to more positive views towards



persistent protests. Social media networking sustained young activism during a period of low social mobilization.

Taking a more long-term view can also reveal the limitations of decentralized movements. The extant literature has pointed towards various problems and weaknesses of decentralized movements. Tufekci (2017) noted the problem of tactical freeze in the absence of effective leadership. Lee and Chan (2018) noted how connective action facilitated participation mainly among people who already shared the grievances driving a movement, but it failed to persuade the larger public. Lai and Sing (2020) highlighted the inability to stop radicalization, tactical pitfalls, and lack of representatives for effective negotiation. Most pertinent to the discussion here, Shahin and Ng (2022) argued that connective action is not sustainable because of its inefficacy in maintaining a discourse of resistance, which results from individualization, excessive flexibility, and a negative emotional culture. Ho (2020) offered the same critique about the sustainability of decentralized and spontaneous protests in the most recent wave of labour protests surrounding the issue of working hours in Taiwan.

On the other hand, one might also argue that once researchers move beyond the contentious moment, the question of whether connective action is sustainable can be better reframed as a question about how digital elements may be integrated into the more organized elements of a movement. Cassegard (2023), in this special issue, seeks to explain the resurgence of protests and activism in Japan in the 2010s. Historically, activism was stigmatized in Japan after the decline of the New Left in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, there were ‘niches’ in which people developed and practised innovative ideas and alternative lifestyles. Cassegard particularly highlights the significance of free-ter activism, which contributed to the precarity movement in the 2000s and then the explosion of social mobilization in the 2010s. In Cassegard’s study, networked activism does not involve a spectacular outburst of spontaneous actions; it involves individuals oriented towards an alternative lifestyle connecting in their own exclusive and safe spaces. The community developed its discourses, action repertoire, networks, and identities. When the environment became more conducive to activism and triggering events occurred, these discourses, templates, and networks became important resources for social movements.

In South Korea, the individualized social networks among legislators reinforced a weakly institutionalized political party system after four decades of democratic transitions (Choi & Hong, 2020). In this sense, bottom-up mobilization and ad hoc networks were derived from long-term interactions between the political elite and social activists. Indeed, Jung’s (2023) article in this special issue shows that anti-government protests did not always succeed in South Korea. Comparing the unsuccessful mobilization surrounding the Sewol Ferry tragedy in 2014 and the successful anti-Park mobilization in 2016, the author argued that the success of mobilization was premised on the mechanisms of attribution of opportunities, elite realignment, and expansion of mobilizing networks.

Ho (2023), in this special issue, explains the rise of Taiwan’s pro-nuclear movement in the 2010s. This phenomenon is intriguing because the anti-nuclear movement was arguably at the peak of its power and influence after the Fukushima incident in Japan. Nevertheless, since 2013, a new pro-nuclear movement led by an informal network built via the internet has gained ground, culminating in the success of a public referendum in 2018. Ho elucidated the trajectory of the countermovement by examining its interactions



with the environmental movement at large. According to Ho, the crux of its success lays in its ability to exploit the anti-nuclear movement's weaknesses, frame the use of nuclear energy as conducive to environmental protection, and align with specific environmental groups on specific issues.

Thompson and Cheng (2023), in this special issue, compare the claim radicalization processes in the Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong and the 2020 anti-government protests in Thailand. Both protests began with the protesters making moderate claims, but the claims radicalized due to the government nonresponsiveness and repressive police tactics. However, there were subtle differences between these two cases. In the Anti-ELAB Movement, protest mobilization was city-wide and cross-sectoral. There was a strong need to stick to the lowest common denominator to unite the public. The moderate 'five demands' remained the dominant theme in significant protest events, while the more radical demands were often more conspicuous in smaller events. In Thailand, there was no such correlation between protest size and the radicalness of the demands. In both cases, protest demands emerged from the bottom up through horizontal communication. The evolution of the demands was nonetheless shaped by interactions between the movement and the state and interactions within the movement.

In the literature on this issue, relatively little has been said about how relational dynamics continue after the peak of mobilization. Lee's (2023) analysis of the international front of the Anti-ELAB Movement ended with a brief discussion of the dissolution of movement organizations and the disconnection between local and overseas activists after the enactment of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in June 2020. In this special issue, the high school concern groups and the liberal-oriented professional associations discussed by Yuen and Tang (2023) and Ma and Cheng (2023) also faced a similar fate of dissolution after the National Security Law came into place. These postmovement consequences show the importance of tracking the continual interaction between social movements and the state and how this interaction shapes movement organizing with and without organizations.

In one sense, this trajectory could inform the extent of movement abeyance and biographical consequences after intensive episodes of activism. In the context of widespread democratic backsliding in Asia, these structural and institutional conditions could imply an extended period of movement abeyance. On the one hand, the prevalence of state repression could motivate activists to retreat from active engagement and observe the new boundaries of contention. On the other hand, a detour to cultural issues may enable the preservation of group values, identity, and vision by reconnecting politics to everyday life, networking with individuals, and broadening citizens' democratic imaginations. Covert activism in urban metropolises (Beissinger, 2022) may well reinforce the classic story of 'rightful resistance' (O'Brien & Li, 2006) and 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1985) in rural areas in East and Southeast Asia.

### **Concluding remarks**

This essay discusses how the articles in this special issue contribute to our understanding of defensive and networked social movements, both in the East and Southeast Asian contexts and in general theoretical terms. This special issue reveals the hybridity of networked movements, where preexisting social networks and civil society

configurations nonetheless support bottom-up mobilization, horizontal organization, and digital coordination. However, instead of such movements being addressed in the ideal form of structureless connective action, informal digital networks are seen as typically coexisting with organization-induced mobilization. This essay calls for more attention to the interactions between organizing with and without organizations. Various contributors also explicitly or implicitly argued for the need to recognize the continued relevance and novel character of protest leadership, unpack the relational dynamics, and take a more long-term perspective. This will enhance our understanding of the ebbs and flows of eventful moments and everyday activism in the region.

This special issue also reveals the changing modes and impacts of networked social movements in Asia. The rise and development of mass mobilizations in many seemingly resilient hybrid regimes suggest that we need to go beyond focusing on socio-ethnic cleavages, power elite coalitions, and governance mechanisms to reveal the region's changing power dynamics and social configurations. Despite the increase in institutional constraints and organizational weakness, informal network and ordinary protesters actively participate in the organizing process by contributing their time, effort, skills, and expertise and taking ownership of challenging tasks and roles. They also bring along their social networks, leveraging various communicative tools to facilitate mobilizing and organizing protests. In other words, protesters are participants in a literal sense – not simply attendees. These phenomena may not be novel in liberal and highly developed societies but are eminent in comparison to the early waves of anti-authoritarian and pro-democracy protests in the region. The highly intensive and demanding roles may thus leave enduring organizational experiences and biographical traces upon individual protesters.

Moreover, the unprecedented electoral victories of the opposition in Malaysia in 2020 and Thailand in 2022 showcased the power of mass movements to reshape the power structure in the hybrid regimes of Asia. To be sure, both Anwar Ibrahim and Pita Limjaroenrat came from the class of political and business elites. However, one should also be reminded that they had been expelled and excluded by the long-ruling coalitions of the United Malays National Organisation in Malaysia and the royal-military junta in Thailand. More importantly, the broader political coalitions they built were heavily derived from civil society organizations and movement networks. Even their platforms and constituencies consisted of various protest claims. Whether they can effectively check institutional decay is subject to many uncertainties. However, the rise of these new political agencies and their organizing efforts exhibited an alternative path and outcome of social movements in the region.

Indeed, one special issue cannot cover every worthwhile topic. Several countries in the region are missing from this issue. Malaysia, which has a history of internet activism and significant protest events such as the Bersih rallies for free and fair elections (Lim, 2017; Postill, 2014), is probably the one that is most conspicuously absent. However, this introductory article has offered the outline of a framework that highlights the significance of relational dynamics, the defensive character of much mobilization under democratic backsliding, and the decentralized yet hybrid organizing logic among the masses for studying social movements in the region and beyond. The specific contributions of this special issue shed light on specific elements of the framework.

Another issue that might still need to receive substantive treatment is state control of the internet and its implications for activism. While networked social movements are digitally

enabled, the internet can facilitate state surveillance and political power as well as opposition movements. Beyond the obvious case of China, Tsui (2015) discussed the possible colonization of cyberspace by the Hong Kong government after the Umbrella Movement. Sinpeng (2020) more recently discussed the implications of internet control for political protests and democracy in Southeast Asia. The internet is another arena in which the state and protest movements interact.

Last, more research is needed for this region to address the ways in which movements and activists in different countries interact with and influence each other. On the one hand, there are conventional issues such as diffusion of movement tactics and discourses across borders. On the other hand, digital media could facilitate the bottom-up formation of global advocacy campaigns, especially in the presence of common concerns among multiple societies (Cheng et al., 2023). A recent case of transnational hashtag activism in East and Southeast Asia was the formation of the ‘milk tea alliance’ in April 2020, which brought together citizens in Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Myanmar, and India (Dedman & Lai, 2021). The hashtag campaign initially aimed to counteract the influence of Chinese netizens. It later evolved into an informal network for pro-democracy protesters in different countries to support each other. The origin, potential, and limitations of such transnational network movements remain to be seen.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the two reviewers and Priska Daphi for providing insightful comments and feedback on earlier drafts of this introductory article. The article also benefited greatly from the discussion with the contributors in this special issue.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The work was supported by the Research Grants Council, University Grants Committee [9043086].

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