

## **The Role of Japanese Non-state Actors in Democracy Promotion in Malaysia Complementing, Not Challenging**

*Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail and Amalin Sabiha Ismail*

### **Abstract**

Japan has assumed a position as one of the rising promoters of democracy. However, the role is largely centered on state actors rather than non-state actors, especially regarding engagement with civil society organizations. Despite the huge number of Japanese think tanks and non-governmental organizations, only a handful of them participate in the promotion of democracy globally. This exploratory essay seeks to examine the form of democracy promotion channeled by Japanese non-state actors to Malaysia, through a case study of two key Japanese non-state actors in Malaysia, namely the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. The findings indicate that both organizations adopt a rather accommodative approach and play a complementary role to that of the Japanese government based on track-two diplomacy. This contrasts to the role played by high-profile non-state actors such as the National Endowment for Democracy (United States) and the Stiftungen (Germany), which have taken an approach that emphasizes engagement with the grassroots community in their democracy promotion strategies, especially in Malaysia. The decrease of engagement by Japanese non-state actors in Malaysia also raises questions regarding the role they could play in Malaysia's current transitional period.

**Keywords:** Civil society organizations, Japanese democracy promotion, non-state actors, Nippon Foundation, Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

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**T**he phenomenon of globalization, as modernization and development theory puts it, has boosted the growth of non-state actors as a key entity in the promotion of democracy. Non-state actors are regarded as agents of checks and balances against state actors through their diverse approaches in promoting

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democracy that specifically cater to civil society organizations (CSOs). To some extent, Japan has been part of this trend, in line with its status as one of the stable democracies in Asia. In 2006, the Japanese government included democracy promotion as the fourth pillar in Japan's diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there is a consensus that Japanese non-state actors play only a minimal role and are almost nonexistent in Japanese promotion of democracy as compared to Western democracy promoters. Many studies find that contributions to Southeast Asian countries by low-profile democracy promoters such as Japan are directed mainly toward governments as the dominant recipient, leading to a stigma that views democracy assistance as an elitist program due to its lack of engagement with civil society.<sup>2</sup> A preliminary study of Japanese democracy assistance to Malaysia suggests that the Japanese government seems to focus solely on regime-compatible programs that are dominated by the recipient government, with little to no contribution to Malaysian CSOs.<sup>3</sup> The study also indicates the need for further analysis of the role of Japanese non-state actors, claimed by leading Malaysian democrat figure Anwar Ibrahim as being more prominent.<sup>4</sup>

This exploratory essay seeks to examine the form of democracy promotion channeled by Japanese non-state actors to Malaysia through a case study of two key Japanese non-state actors in Malaysia, namely the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF). The findings indicate that both organizations adopted a rather accommodative approach and played a complementary role to that of the Japanese government on the basis of track-two diplomacy. This stands in contrast to the role played by high-profile non-state actors such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) of the United States and the Stiftungen of Germany, which have taken an approach that emphasizes engagement with the grassroots community in their strategies to promote democracy, especially in Malaysia. However, the lesser engagement on the part of Japanese non-state actors in Malaysia raises questions regarding the role they could play in Malaysia's current transitional period.

This essay is divided into four subsections. The first part is a conceptual discussion concerning the complementary interplay between the roles of state

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<sup>1</sup> Maiko Ichihara, *Japan's International Democracy Assistance as Soft Power: Neoclassical Realist Analysis* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Yasunobu Sato, "Japan's Approach to Global Democracy Support: Focused on Law and Judicial Reform Assistance," in *U.S.—Japan Approaches to Democracy Promotion*, ed. Michael R. Auslin and Daniel E. Bob (Washington, DC: Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, 2017), 37-44, and Ichihara, *Japan's International Democracy Assistance as Soft Power*.

<sup>3</sup> Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail and Amalin Sabiha, "Japan as a Reluctant Actor in Democracy Promotion: The Case of Malaysia," 2nd Biennial International Conference on International Relations (ICONIR) and the 12th Congress of Asian Political and International Studies Association, Bandung, October 5—6, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Anwar Ibrahim, "The Prospects for Democracy in the Asian Century" (June 7, 2014), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/14599> (accessed November 16, 2019).

and non-state actors. This is followed by discussion of the background and development of civil society in Japan, which serves as a crucial entry point to understanding the sluggish growth of Japanese civil society and its effect on the growth of Japan's democracy-related non-state actors. The third section observes the background of civil society in Malaysia in relation to the three largest non-state actors in democracy promotion in Malaysia, namely the Open Society Foundations (OSF), the NED, and the German Stiftungen, which serve as a contrast to the role played by Japanese non-state actors. The last section analyzes two case studies of the most visible Japanese non-state actors in democracy-related programs in Malaysia, the Nippon Foundation and the SPF.

As well as drawing from secondary sources, this essay derives its originality from interviews conducted with eleven informants who are experts on Japanese and Malaysian democracy, civil society activists, and individuals who have participated in programs conducted by the Nippon Foundation and the SPF. This research adds to the general study of democracy promotion, using the case of Japan and Malaysia, and contributes to a neglected dimension: democracy promotion within the larger study of Malaysia–Japan bilateral relations.

### **Conceptualizing Non-state Actors in the Context of Democracy Promotion**

The spread of liberalism through ideas concerning civil society and civic rights, advanced by thinkers such as Adam Smith (1723–1790) and Alexis de Tocquville (1805–1859), has served to establish non-state actors as agents of checks and balances against state actors in democratization. The role of the state decreases with the increase of globalization, primarily by means of non-state actors' criticism of the state in matters pertaining to democracy.<sup>5</sup> Daphné Josselin and William Wallace define a non-state actor based on three main characteristics.<sup>6</sup> First, a non-state actor is an organization that emerges from civil society, the market economy, and political impulses, free from governmental control and funding. Second, a non-state actor organization is transnational in nature, with strong political, economic, and social ties beyond national borders. Third, to achieve its objectives, such an organization seeks to influence the political outcomes of international or regional institutions. The definition of a non-state actor encompasses eight basic categories: nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), business groups,

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<sup>5</sup> Anne-Marie M. Balbi, "The Influence of Non-state Actors on Global Politics" (August 26, 2016), Australian Institute of International Affairs, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-influence-of-non-state-actors-on-global-politics/> (accessed July 12, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Daphné Josselin and William Wallace, "Non-state Actors in World Politics: A Framework," in *Non-state Actors in World Politics*, ed. Daphné Josselin and William Wallace (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 3-4.

political organizations, religious entities, criminal organizations, policy research institutes, international exchange foundations, and philanthropies.<sup>7</sup>

CSOs have become the dominant non-state actor in the discourse of democratization. They have great influence in strengthening democratic processes in a country due to their “bridging role” that breaks through the walls between elites, the middle class, and the working class in a society.<sup>8</sup> Unlike state actors that are bound by diplomatic code and tend to place great emphasis on a regime-compatible approach in democracy promotion, non-state actors focus on a non-regime-compatible approach: the opening of democratic space and the mobilization of democratic movements in a country.<sup>9</sup> Germany, for instance, is widely known for its political foundations, the Stiftung, which are led by six key foundations, including the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (FNS). These foundations have played a central role in spreading the idea of democracy since before World War Two. They also played a key role in assisting the transition processes in Spain, Portugal, and Chile, and became a model for promoting democracy that later was adopted by other European countries and by the United States.<sup>10</sup> The Stiftungen model was embraced by the NED, which was established in 1982 in the United States and assumed an important place among non-state actors during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods.<sup>11</sup> The Open Society Foundations (OSF), on the other hand, was founded on the idea of a “free society,” and is now becoming one of the largest donors to democracy in the world, with estimated funding of USD500 million annually.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tadashi Yamamoto, “The Growing Role of Non-state Actors in International Affairs,” Japan Center of International Exchange (1995), [http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/Role\\_Nonstate/4\\_Chapter%203.pdf](http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/Role_Nonstate/4_Chapter%203.pdf) (accessed July 13, 2018), 41, and Fred Halliday, “The Romance of Non-state Actors,” in *Non-state Actors in World Politics*, ed. Daphné Josselin and William Wallace (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 26.

<sup>8</sup> David Lewis and Nazneen Kanji, *Non-governmental Organization and Development* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 133.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, “Foreign Political Aid: The German Political Foundations and Their US Counterparts,” *International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (1991): 45-46, and Peter Burnell, “Does International Democracy Promotion Work?” German Development Institute, Discussion Paper 17 (2007), 3.

<sup>11</sup> James M. Scott and Carie A. Steele, “Assisting Democrats or Resisting Dictators? The Nature and Impact of Democracy Support by the United States National Endowment for Democracy, 1990–99,” *Democratization* 12, no. 4 (2005): 439-460, and Ronald W. Cox and Nelson G. Bass, “The Foreign Policy of Organized Labor in the Context of Globalization,” in *Corporate Power and Globalization in US Foreign Policy*, ed. Ronald W. Cox (London: Routledge, 2012), 56-78.

<sup>12</sup> Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies throughout the World* (New York: Times Books, 2008), 128, and Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*, 153.

Although democracy promoters tend to project a broad definition of civil society, the reality indicates their tendency to observe civil society as synonymous with the growth of NGOs, giving rise to a phenomenon called the “NGOization of civil society.”<sup>13</sup> Several factors have influenced democracy promoters to focus on civil society. The first was the mass social movements in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia, that engaged in nonviolent and prodemocracy resistance. Second, promoters shifted their focus to civil society due to the many limitations and restrictions in democracy assistance channeled to government institutions and electoral systems, as well as the limited impact they were able to have on the process. Third, promoters started to fund programs to strengthen civil society in developing and former communist countries with the hope that civil society would become a significant agent in the transition to and the consolidation of democracy.<sup>14</sup> The confrontational approach taken by non-state actors in democratization processes, especially in former Soviet countries,<sup>15</sup> consequently created a stigma that democracy assistance is part of an instrument for regime change.

There are several ways in which non-state actors complement the role of state actors in the promotion of democracy. First, non-state actors can explore areas of democracy that cannot be explored by state actors due to sensitivity and diplomatic factors. This edge became the basis for the establishment of foundations such as the Stiftungen and the NED, whereby non-state actors, unrestrained by strict diplomatic code, can freely conduct democracy-related programs and select their target groups. Second, non-state actors are closer to the grassroots, and thus capable of developing social capital that adds value to political participation.<sup>16</sup> CSOs function as a “school for democracy” through provision of resources and opportunities to grassroots movements, while also increasing political participation, which can enhance democratization in a country.<sup>17</sup> Third, non-state actors can function as an alternative funder, regarded as a “magic bullet” for grassroots movements facing red-tape problems imposed by state actors when acquiring assistance for community-building

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<sup>13</sup> Armine Ishkanian, “Democracy Promotion and Civil Society,” in *Global Civil Society 2007/8: Communicative Power and Democracy*, ed. Martin Albrow, Helmut K. Anheier, Marlies Glasius, Monroe E. Price, and M. Kaldor (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 58-85.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), and George Perlin, “International Assistance to Democratic Development: A Review,” IRPP Working Paper Series no. 2003-04 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Wilson, “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, NGOs and the Role of the West,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no. 1 (2006): 21-32, and Michael McFaul, “Ukraine Imports Democracy: External Influences on the Orange Revolution,” *International Security* 32, no. 2 (2007): 45-83.

<sup>16</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Nicola Banks, David Hulme, and Michael Edwards, “NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?” *World Development* 66 (2014): 711.

projects.<sup>18</sup> Fourth, non-state actors become agents of promoting track-two diplomacy, also known as grassroots diplomacy, the people's diplomacy, and informal diplomacy.<sup>19</sup> Track-one diplomacy is traditional in nature, involving a country's top leadership that engages in official visits and meetings, and normally employs a coercive and forceful approach, often leading to conflict.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, track-two diplomacy may include actors such as intellectuals, members of the media, community representatives, and businessmen who can become involved in any consultation, negotiation, or discussion to influence government policies.<sup>21</sup> For example, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was partly solved through track-two diplomacy involving broadcasting journalists such as John Scali of the ABC network.<sup>22</sup>

### Japanese Non-state Actors in Democracy Promotion

Terminology plays a crucial role in distinguishing Japanese non-state actors from their counterparts elsewhere. Literature centered on Japanese civil society tends to use the term NPOs (non-profit organizations) because Japan's civil society possesses a different organizational composition and mobilization strategy than is prevalent in other Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Civil society in these countries is characterized more by mass movements that demand political change. The nature of Japanese civil society is also different from what is largely understood in the West or by Gramscians, by contrast, as it is closer to non-confrontational, small, and weak volunteer movements.<sup>23</sup>

Although Japanese non-state actors certainly have evolved since their origins in the sixteenth century, their domains remain limited to religious activities, charity-based programs, and academic organizations.<sup>24</sup> Japanese CSO activities expanded only in the 1960s, following Japan's economic

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis and Kanji, *Non-governmental Organization and Development*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Yamamoto, "The Growing Role of Non-state Actors in International Affairs," 44.

<sup>20</sup> William D. Davidson and Joseph V. Montville, "Foreign Policy According to Freud," *Foreign Policy* 45 (1981): 154.

<sup>21</sup> Noda Makito, "The Role of Non-state Actors in Building an ASEAN Community," *Road to ASEAN-10: Japanese Perspectives on Economic Integration*, ed. Sekiguchi Suetoshi and Noda Makito (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 1999), 167-194.

<sup>22</sup> See Eytan Gilboa, "Media-Broker Diplomacy: When Journalists Become Mediators," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 2 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180500071998> (accessed September 13, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Chan, "Civil Society and Global Citizenship in Japan," in *Japanese Politics Today: From Karaoke to Kabuki Democracy*, ed. Takashi Inoguchi and Purnendra Jain (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 134, and Isa Ducek, *Civil Society and the Internet in Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 36.

<sup>24</sup> Tadashi Yamamoto, "The Non-profit Sector in Japan: Historical Evolution and Future Challenges," Japan Center of International Exchange (1995), p. 89, [http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/Role\\_Nonstate/6\\_Chapter%205.pdf](http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/Role_Nonstate/6_Chapter%205.pdf) (accessed July 13, 2018).

miracle, through the establishment of corporate think tanks that later provided scholarships and grants for science and technology programs.<sup>25</sup> The expansion also was catalyzed by the restoration of Japan—U.S. bilateral relations that led to the growth of track-two diplomacy. For example, the establishment of the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) in the early 1960s stemmed from the need for cooperation with several American think tanks, such as the Ford Foundation and the American Assembly of Columbia University. Besides think tanks, the 1970s saw the rise of mass-movement CSOs through civil society activism, focusing on domestic issues such as welfare, the environment, education, and health. Similar to other countries at that time, the driving factor for a wider channel for political and social participation was the significant growth of the middle class that largely refused to rely on conventional channels in tackling various issues. Such development also was influenced by the increasing number of NGO leaders with Western education as well as by increased demands among CSOs on behalf of labor.<sup>26</sup> Japanese society also gained much civil awareness from the influence of international CSOs championing universal concerns such as human rights, which motivated it to participate in CSO development.<sup>27</sup> The Indochina refugee crisis in 1979 caught the attention of Japanese citizens after the Japanese media reported images of human rights violations suffered by these refugees. Thus, around twenty CSOs were formed in the early 1980s as a response to the crisis, including the Japan International Volunteer Center and the Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee in 1980, with an aim to dispatch humanitarian aid to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.<sup>28</sup> Although they were small in number, the emergence of these CSOs was significant in creating a new image of Japanese civil society that actively championed human rights. However, the emergence of these CSOs led to criticism of Japan's slow and inefficient responses to international humanitarian crises, as the burden of providing humanitarian assistance during the early phase fell to non-state actors instead of the Japanese government.<sup>29</sup> Japan continued to experience international pressure to share the responsibility for maintaining global security, due to its developed economy and technological expertise. This led to the emergence of the Japanese think tanks that provide a platform for track-two diplomacy to connect Japan with other countries.

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<sup>25</sup> Makoto Imada, "Civil Society in Japan: Democracy, Voluntary Action, and Philanthropy," in *Civic Engagement in Contemporary Japan: Established and Emerging Repertoires*, ed. H. Vinken, Y. Nishimura, B. L. J. White, and M. Deguchi (New York: Springer, 2010), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Yoichi Funabashi, "NGOs as a Force for Civilian Power: How the 'Associational Revolution' Is Changing the World," Japan Center for International Exchange (1995), p. 68, [http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/Role\\_Nonstate/5\\_Chapter%204.pdf](http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/Role_Nonstate/5_Chapter%204.pdf) (accessed July 20, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Yamamoto, "The Non-profit Sector in Japan," 93.

<sup>28</sup> Keiko Hirata, *Civil Society in Japan: The Growing Role of NGOs in Tokyo's Aid and Development Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 32.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas R. H. Havens, "Japan's Response to the Indochinese Refugee Crisis," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 18, no. 1 (1990): 173.

These think tanks include the Japan Forum on International Relations, the Institute for International Policy Studies, and the National Institute for Research Advancement.<sup>30</sup>

The 1990s saw a significant evolution of Japanese non-state actors. The end of the Cold War had ushered in a new era of world politics. In Japan, the peace movement started to gain more ground in national politics. The gender issue (the call for restitution made to comfort women), rape cases perpetrated by U.S. military personnel in Okinawa, and the proposal to move the U.S. military base to Henoko led to the cooperation of Japanese and international peace organizations, such as Greenpeace. Another turning point was the Great Hanshin earthquake in 1995 that initiated a large-scale volunteer movement to provide aid to victims. Such development continued until 2000, with the emergence of grassroots movements that opposed the Iraq War and led to the establishment of movements such as World Peace Now.<sup>31</sup>

Understandably, as Japan's postwar democracy was externally imposed, there has been an absence of domestic civil society initiative to consolidate Japan's democracy when compared to its democratic neighbors. Despite their positive development, the involvement of Japanese CSOs is still lacking in democratic and human rights initiatives due to their tendency to leave such matters to state actors.<sup>32</sup> Further, Japan's request-based approach is criticized because it complicates the process for domestic CSOs to secure grants. According to Ryokichi Hirono,<sup>33</sup> the request-based approach favors only those in the government, political parties, and business sectors rather than reflecting the demand-based aspirations of society, in general, and civil society, in particular. The Japanese language barrier also is a challenge to widespread involvement of Japanese CSOs at the international level, particularly in democracy-related issues.<sup>34</sup> Although Japan continues to strengthen government–CSO cooperation through the establishment of a funding platform (the Japan Platforms), the initiative focuses only on issues related to humanity, the environment, and education.<sup>35</sup> Another limitation is that Japan rejects the idea of establishing a Japan Foundation for Democracy, and it is inclined to use the U.N. platform, despite pressure from diplomats and CSOs.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Junnosuke Kishida et al., "Japan's Tasks in the 1990s," *NIRA Research Output 1*, no. 1 (1988): 5-6.

<sup>31</sup> Chan, "Civil Society and Global Citizenship in Japan," and Ducke, *Civil Society and the Internet in Japan*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Makio Ichihara, "Japan's Democracy Support to Indonesia: Weak Involvement of Civil Society Actors," *Asian Survey* 56, no. 5 (2016): 908.

<sup>33</sup> Ryokichi Hirono, Japanese expert on development and democracy assistance, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 13 and 21, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Takashi Inoguchi, Japanese expert on democracy, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 20, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Koichi Sugaira, Japanese expert on democracy assistance, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 27, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> James Gomez, "Establishing a Malaysian Democracy Foundation" (August 6, 2018), <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/85342> (accessed August 10, 2018).

The absence of a specific organization tasked with regulating democracy-related matters further emphasizes the functions of Japanese think tanks as: (1) a bridge between the government and CSOs; (2) the presenter of intellectual opinions about the importance of CSOs in a borderless world; and (3) the provider of public policy proposals demanding that the government be open to participatory democracy.<sup>37</sup> Table 1 shows five categories of think tanks in Japan.

Among the five categories listed in table 1, only civil society organizations play an explicit role in democracy-related matters. Among universities, Japan has yet to establish a research institute specializing in studies of democracy, along the lines of the American institutes at Stanford University or Georgetown University. Government think tanks, on the other hand, normally are established to assist and influence Japanese government agencies in matters related to domestic or foreign affairs. They generally are bound by the Japanese government's policies. Much the same is true for the corporate think tanks founded by the "keiretsu" or Japanese conglomerates. Unlike the other categories, there is no available information on political party think tanks. It is understood that both the Liberal Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Japan attempted to establish their own think tanks after 2005, but the initiatives were not long lived.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, contributions from quarters other than civil society, such as the government and the corporate sector, in influencing, funding, and establishing an international network related to democracy should not be underestimated. It should be noted that Japan has the tendency to define democracy in a broad sense that encompasses the security sector, ranging from traditional security to human security. Japan also views democracy, economic development, and the promotion of peace as interrelated and complementary.<sup>39</sup> Such concerns involve all the mentioned think tanks, as well as civil society. However, these entities do not focus on any specific areas of democracy promotion such as political parties, civil society, the media, or human rights. According to Maiko Ichihara,<sup>40</sup> Japan depends on several other components of civil society to exert pressure on the Japanese government in the promotion

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<sup>37</sup> Tadashi Yamamoto, "Emergence of Japan's Civil Society and Its Future Challenges," in *Deciding the Public Good: Governance and Civil Society in Japan*, ed. Tadashi Yamamoto (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 1999), 105.

<sup>38</sup> Pascall Abb and Patrick Koellner, "Foreign Policy Think Tanks in China and Japan: Characteristics, Current Profile, and the Case of Collective Self-Defence," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 70, no. 4 (2015): 597.

<sup>39</sup> Hirono, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, and Akihiko Tanaka, president of GRIPS and former president of JICA, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 30, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Maiko Ichihara, "Japan's International Democracy Assistance," paper presented at public lecture, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, July 11, 2019.

Table 1. Categories of Think Tanks in Japan

Category	Entities
Civil Society Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS)</li> <li>• Nippon Foundation</li> <li>• Sasakawa Peace Foundation</li> <li>• Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE)</li> <li>• Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS)</li> <li>• Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR)</li> </ul>
University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asia-Japan Research Institute (AJRI) (Ritsumeikan University)</li> <li>• Institute for Global Affairs (IGA) (Meiji University)</li> <li>• National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)</li> <li>• Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSAS) (Kyoto University)</li> <li>• Policy Alternatives Research Institute (PARI) (University of Tokyo)</li> </ul>
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS)</li> <li>• Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA)</li> <li>• Japan Foundation</li> <li>• Institute for Developing Economies—Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO)</li> </ul>
Corporate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nomura Research Institute (NRI)</li> <li>• Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS)</li> <li>• Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting (MUFJRC)</li> <li>• Sumitomo Foundation</li> </ul>
Political Party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No information</li> </ul>

Sources: Adapted from Diane Stone, “Think Tanks and Policy Advice in Countries in Transition,” Paperwork Asian Development Bank Institute Symposium on How to Strengthen Policy-Oriented Research and Training in Vietnam, organized by the Asian Development Bank Institute, Hanoi, Vietnam, August 31, 2005; Pascall Abb and Patrick Koellner, “Foreign Policy Think Tanks in China and Japan: Characteristics, Current Profile, and the Case of Collective Self-Defence,” *International Journal: Canada’s Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 70, no. 4 (2015): 593-612; and Haruko Satoh, “Reflections on Japanese Think Tanks: Roles, Relevance and Limitations,” in *Rethinking Diplomacy: New Approaches and Domestic Challenges in East Asia and the European Union*, ed. Peng Er Lam and C. Duerkop (Seoul: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2011), 65-84.

of democracy. Among these are the Japan bureaus of Western NGOs (e.g., Amnesty Japan and Human Rights Watch Japan); media with an international audience (e.g., NHK International, Nikkei Asia Review); past participants in democracy assistance (e.g., Yasushi Akashi, Ken Inoue, and Yasunobu Sato); and academics with links to the West (e.g., Ryo Sahashi and Maiko Ichihara).

## The Role of Non-state Actors in Democracy Promotion in Malaysia

Malaysian democracy tends to be coupled with adjectives such as semi-authoritarian,<sup>41</sup> hybrid-regime,<sup>42</sup> and competitive authoritarianism.<sup>43</sup> These terms express the political order established by the previous *Barisan Nasional* (BN) regime, with its emphasis on strongman leadership, systematic coercion and suppression, maintenance of the status quo, and conservative political institutions. Although possessing several key characteristics of democracy—namely, elections, opposition parties, and civil society—all these elements operate in accordance with parameters set by the BN regime to preserve its objectives of maintaining political stability, a power-sharing system in a multi-ethnic country, and Malaysia's position as a developmentalist state.

The confrontational nature of Malaysian civil society, in relation to its Japan counterpart, should be discussed within the abovementioned context. Although much evidence points to the rapid growth of Malaysian civil society and NGOs following the 1998 political crisis, this societal segment has yet to become established and independent, along Western lines, due to the use of English as its main medium for communication, its emphasis on urban and middle-class groups, its system of patronage, its advocacy for exclusive issues, and its financial dependence.<sup>44</sup> Such characteristics contribute to the close relations (and sometimes dependency) between civil society and prodemocracy movements, on the one hand, and between civil society and the opposition coalition, on the other. As noted by Muthiah Alagappa: “Here [in Malaysia], there was a sort of merger [between CSOs] and [the] opposition [in terms of] trying to unseat the government. That’s why the [BN] government’s view on CSO[s] was very negative.”<sup>45</sup> Media activist Fathi Aris Omar also observes:

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<sup>41</sup> Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> Larry Diamond, “Elections without Democracy: Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 134, no. 2 (2002): 21-35.

<sup>43</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Meredith L. Weiss and Saliha Hassan, “Introduction: From Moral Communities to NGOs,” in *Social Movements in Malaysia: From Moral Communities to NGOs*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss and Saliha Hassan (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 42; Patricia Sloane-White and Isabelle Beaulieu, “Beyond 50 Years of Political Stability in Malaysia: Rent and the Weapons of the Power Elite,” *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 30, nos. 3–4 (2010): 385-386; and Amer Hamzah Arshad et al., “Defending Civil Society: Report on Laws and Regulations Governing Civil Society Organizations in Malaysia” (Washington, DC: World Movement for Democracy, 2011), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Muthiah Alagappa, Nonresident Senior Fellow in Asia at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, May 8, 2017.

The idea [for an independent civil society] is you have to stick in “the middle power.” Somewhere in between opposition and government and public. That’s what we define as public sphere or civil society. You can convey whatever you like but you don’t have to associate [with any one of them]. The problem is that here, there are no available channels to be independent.<sup>46</sup>

This partially explains why Western democracy promoters are inclined to channel their assistance to anti-establishment elements in Malaysia, with the expectation of furthering the liberalization of democratic values and preventing democratic backsliding. Three popular promoters known to do so are the OSF, the Stiftungen, and the NED, which eventually led to their being singled out by the then BN regime under allegations of engaging in activities to destabilize the government.

Before starting operations in Malaysia in the early 2000s, the OSF already had caught the attention of critics and the BN regime, especially Mahathir Mohamad. Available records indicate that the OSF has actively funded anti-establishment elements, such as Malaysiakini, BERSIH, SUARAM, Empower, C4, Tenaganita, Liberal Banters, Pusat KOMAS, and the Centre for Independent Journalism. There is no official record that ever has been publicized by the OSF revealing the amount and the trend of its funding. However, an exposure by DC Leaks in 2016 provides a glimpse into the trend of OSF funding. Following the leak, the OSF disclosed that it had been channeling into Malaysia an average of USD700,000 a year over the past decade. Most importantly, an OSF internal document acknowledges the need for the OSF to review all its programs in Malaysia, as the engaged groups have close ties with the opposition network.<sup>47</sup>

While the OSF is privately funded, the NED is financed by the U.S. government budget and the German Stiftungen is tied to major political parties that often form the government. The NED of the United States is the largest donor to Malaysia, with USD10.805 million (1991–2015). However, almost 70 percent of the funding has gone to political parties and the election sector managed by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The remaining 30 percent has gone to four other key sectors among CSOs: the media; human rights and legislation; Islam and democracy; and civic education and governance. Similar to the OSF, all major CSOs that receive NED funding are known to be anti-establishment, such as

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<sup>46</sup> Fathi Aris Omar, former editor of *Malaysiakini*, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, November 6, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, *Bantuan Demokrasi dan Pendanaan Asing di Malaysia: Melewati Pertukaran Rejim* [Democracy assistance and foreign funding in Malaysia: Beyond regime change] (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, 2019), 197-215.

Malaysiakini, the Centre for Independent Journalism, Suaram, Lawyers for Liberty, Liberal Banter, and C4. In addition, the NED also has close ties with Anwar Ibrahim.<sup>48</sup> German political foundations, the *Stiftungen*, have three non-state actors operating in Malaysia, namely the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (FNS), and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Although KAS also engages with government-related institutions, the foundation appears to have closer cooperation with think tanks within the People's Justice Party (PKR) circle, such as the Institute for Policy Research (IKD) and the Middle Eastern Graduates Centre. The FNS, on the other hand, focuses on spreading liberal ideas in Malaysia. It funds CSOs that promote liberal ideology, such as the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, Sisters in Islam, the Institute for Leadership and Development Studies, and the Merdeka Centre. FNS also has close relations with PKR leadership and Anwar Ibrahim. For its part, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung engages with social democracy elements in Malaysia, such as the Democratic Action Party and the Malaysian Trade Union Congress.<sup>49</sup>

The cases of the NED and the *Stiftungen* suggest that non-state actors from the United States and Germany focus on target groups with an anti-establishment element—although *Stiftungen* such as the KAS and the FNS also engage with government-related institutions in their programs. While American and German state actors tend to take an apolitical stance and fund regime-compatible programs, the network between the NED or the *Stiftungen* and local actors, especially the opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim, has attracted attention and pressure from critics, Malay-Muslim conservatives, and the BN regime. In this context, this study aims to understand the nature of the approach taken by Japanese non-state actors in promoting democracy in Malaysia, in contrast with their Western counterparts. This includes consideration of their implemented strategy vis-à-vis Japan's being a low-profile promoter of democracy.

### **Case Study: The Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation**

Japan and Malaysia have long enjoyed a special relationship, particularly through the Look East Policy launched by Mahathir Mohamad in 1981. However, the bilateral relationship is based mainly on economic and cultural interests.<sup>50</sup> Both countries almost always refrain from any sort of diplomatic

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<sup>48</sup> Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail and Abdul Muein Abadi, "The United States Democracy Assistance in Malaysia: The Nature and Impact of Concurrent Strategy," *Pacific Review* (2019): 576-602.

<sup>49</sup> Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail and Abdul Muein Abadi, "Educating Politics in Malaysia: The Role of Germany's Democracy Assistance," *Asian Survey* 57, no. 3 (2017): 548-570.

<sup>50</sup> Fumitaka Furuoka, "Malaysia-Japan Relations under the Mahathir Administration: Case Studies of the 'Look East' Policy and Japanese Investment in Malaysia," *Asian Survey* 47, no. 3 (2007): 505-519; Khadijah Md. Khalid, Jason Loh Seong Wei, and Ayame Suzuki, "Three Decades of

row or dispute in order to maintain this state of accord. One recent example of such consideration is the removal of dissenting artworks from a cultural exhibition held in Kuala Lumpur in 2017. In this incident, the Japan Foundation Kuala Lumpur, the organizer, removed artworks by local Sabahan artist, Pangrok Sulap, that contained a political message criticizing the then BN government, in response to reports raised by several parties. The removal received heavy criticism from local artists and cultural activists.<sup>51</sup> The Look East Policy found a second wind—after being moderately pursued by Najib Razak and Abdullah Badawi—following Mahathir’s return to power for his second premiership in 2019.<sup>52</sup>

In examining the role played by Japanese non-state actors, the Nippon Foundation and its sister organization, the SPF, are used as a case study. The Nippon Foundation, founded by Ryochi Sasakawa in 1962, is one of the largest philanthropic foundations in Japan. The SPF, established in 1986, on the other hand, is one of the eighteen sister organizations under the Nippon Foundation, which receives an endowment from the mother foundation. Although both organizations have a close relationship as working partners, they function as independent entities, complete with their own autonomy and management. Thus, it is interesting to observe how these two organizations, which basically have the same root, hold different programs from one another. Several other factors also were considered in selecting the Nippon Foundation and the SPF as a case study.

First, the SPF was among the first private foundations taking the initiative to internationalize Japanese think tanks, as previously explained. Several Japanese experts also acknowledge the Nippon Foundation and the SPF as the most visible organizations in championing democracy-related issues.<sup>53</sup> Sasakawa USA, for instance, has been collaborating with Freedom House since 2004 to address challenges faced by Japan and the United States in democracy promotion. The two organizations also actively fund democracy-

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Malaysia-Japan Relations (1981–2011): Crossed Interests and Missed Opportunities,” *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 4, no. 1 (2015): 73-100; and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Malaysia’s Relations with Major and Middle Power,” *Observatoire Asie Du Sud-est* [Observatory of Southeast Asia] 1, no. 8 (2015): 1-9.

<sup>51</sup> “Japan Foundation Slammed for Allowing ‘Censorship’ at Art Exhibition” (video, 2017), *Malay Mail*, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2017/03/15/japan-foundation-slam-med-for-allowing-censorship-at-art-exhibition-video/1335001> (accessed May 15, 2019).

<sup>52</sup> Japan was the first country visited by Mahathir during his first trip abroad as the seventh prime minister, merely a month after Pakatan Harapan (PH) won the GE14. Over the span of fifteen months (May 2018 to August 2019), he made five visits to Japan, announcing the idea of a third national car project and proposing expanded cooperation in education and trade. Japan also guaranteed a release of RM7.4 billion Samurai bonds to Malaysia to assist its economic recovery.

<sup>53</sup> Inoguchi, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, and Takeshi Yuzawa, Japanese expert on security studies, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 22, 2018.

related research, most recently in 2017.<sup>54</sup> Second, available data show that both organizations have a prominent role in channeling democracy-related assistance to Malaysia, compared to other organizations. First-hand observation of websites and annual reports by Japanese non-state actors shows that it is difficult to identify any project related to democracy. Even if such projects exist, the allocation of funds is still small compared to allocations to other Southeast Asian countries. Third, both organizations are popular among activists, journalists, scholars, and policymakers when it comes to Japan's efforts in promoting ideas of democracy. The API Fellowships and the Asian Renaissance/Muslim Democrats programs conducted by both organizations offer huge credentials regarding Japan's relatively unknown status as a promoter of democracy, compared to other non-state actors such as the OSF, the NED, and the Stiftungen. These facts serve as justification for the collection of primary data for this study from those who have participated in programs conducted by the Nippon Foundation and the SPF.

### ***Nippon Foundation: Asian Public Intellectuals Fellowship Program***

In general, the objective of the Nippon Foundation is to fulfill the idea of human security by assisting underprivileged groups.<sup>55</sup> Certain focus areas, such as conflict resolution, maritime security, and peacebuilding, fit closely with its democracy promotion theme, in line with Japan's priority areas. The foundation started to channel funding to Malaysia in 1979, with the most recent instance being in 2017. The total amount of Nippon Foundation funding to Malaysia has been USD11,431,800. The funded programs are in six key areas: education, health, business, maritime environment, capacity building, and Asian Public Intellectuals (API) fellowships. This essay limits its focus to the API Fellowship Program, which received the largest funding, comprising 58 percent of the overall allocation.<sup>56</sup> The API program was considered prestigious in Malaysia among scholars, activists, and media practitioners. It aimed to establish an Asian public intellectual community within a larger context, not one that was limited to specific academic disciplines. Besides academics, the program was offered to researchers, media practitioners, artists, creative writers, activists, and others, who could "bridge the gap between global and local"<sup>57</sup> and "influence public opinion in order to help formulate

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<sup>54</sup> See Michael R. Auslin and Daniel E. Bob, eds., *U.S.—Japan Approaches to Democracy Promotion* (Washington, DC: Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, 2017), 1-18.

<sup>55</sup> Aya Fukuda, Program Coordinator for Nippon Foundation, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 24, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> The Nippon Foundation, "The Nippon Foundation Overseas Support: Malaysia," written communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Toichi Makita, "The Impact of Private Fellowship Programs on Japan's Foreign Cultural Relations during and after the Cold War Period" (2017), p. 28, [https://obirin.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository\\_action\\_common\\_download&item\\_id=1938&item\\_no=1&attribute\\_id=22&file\\_no=1](https://obirin.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=1938&item_no=1&attribute_id=22&file_no=1) (accessed July 21, 2018).

a strong civil society in Asia.”<sup>58</sup> According to the API Project Coordinator in Malaysia, Dorothy Fernandez, the term “public intellectual” was founded on the assumption that those who were interested in joining the program already were equipped with substantive knowledge and specialization.<sup>59</sup> During the program, fellows were required to research issues in countries other than their own to promote the idea of regional community,<sup>60</sup> as well as “link findings to practical projects for social change” and acquire “tangible results.”<sup>61</sup> In all, API offered 333 fellowships to participants, with an average of sixty fellows from five countries.

In what ways could API fellowships be considered a democracy-related program? Dorothy Fernandez explains that the dimension of democracy was reflected in the API program in several ways. First, it was offered to only five Asian countries deemed by the API to have good democracy: the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The quota for the offer of a fellowship was allocated equally to each country, despite demographic and size differences. The most crucial aspect of the API fellowship was that its content encompassed several key democracy-related themes, such as political rights, free media, human rights, social justice, gender equality, and the legitimate role of civil society. The Nippon Foundation acknowledged that the API program almost resembled a democracy-related program.<sup>62</sup> A survey conducted in conjunction with ten years of the API fellowships as well as an external assessment report described the program as valuable and successful in building the capacity of participants in their respective fields.<sup>63</sup> The question for the current study is, when assessing democracy promotion by the Nippon Foundation to Malaysia, to what extent does this statement hold true?

In a strict sense, only six of fifty-nine Malaysian recipients of the API fellowships can be considered to have conducted democracy-related research:

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<sup>58</sup> Yohei Sasakawa, Speech by Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, President of The Nippon Foundation at the Inaugural Ceremony of the Nippon Foundation Fellowships for Asian Public Intellectuals on July 8, 2000, Nikko Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, <http://www.api-fellowships.org/body/speeches.php#sasakawa> (accessed September 3, 2019).

<sup>59</sup> Dorothy Fernandez, API Project Coordinator in Malaysia, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, July 1, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> I. Ketut Ardhana and Yekti Maunati, “Indonesian Experiences: Research Policies and the Internalization of the Social Sciences,” in *Internationalization of the Social Sciences: Asia-Latin America—Middle East—Africa—Eurasia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 131.

<sup>61</sup> Yohei Sasakawa, “Speech at 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Regional Celebration for Asian Public Intellectuals Fellowships,” in *Asia: Identity, Vision and Position*, ed. Khoo Boo Teik and Tatsuya Tanami (Tokyo: Nippon Foundation, 2012), 6.

<sup>62</sup> Fukuda, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail.

<sup>63</sup> The Nippon Foundation, “Survey Findings: A Summary The Nippon Foundation Fellowships for Asian Public Intellectuals 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Regional Celebration 2010,” in *Asia: Identity, Vision and Position*, ed. Khoo Boo Teik and Tatsuya Tanami (Tokyo: Nippon Foundation, 2012), 166-170, and Makita, “The Impact of Private Fellowship Programs,” 28.

Mustafa Kamal Anuar (alternative media), Amir Muhammad (independent film), Tan Pek Leng (decentralization and democracy), Sharaad Kuttan (deep democracy), Amin Iskandar<sup>64</sup> (election monitoring), and Norhayati Kaprawi<sup>65</sup> (gender concerns). To date, these six people are considered authorities in their respective fields. While it is presumptuous to claim that their prominence in the public domain was solely achieved through their API fellowships, the success of these figures indicates a credible selection of fellows by the organizer. Amir Muhammad, who is known for his political films, says that the API program expanded his network and provided great exposure, and made him aware of the crucial need to provide similar assistance to his successors. Inspired by the API fellowship, Amir, now an independent publisher, has sent several young writers to learn abroad and gain international exposure.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, there are several aspects of the API program that may be critiqued. First, the effectiveness of the program in spreading ideas of democracy was limited by the non-interference principle among ASEAN countries, including the track-two diplomacy that influenced the program's trajectory. One requirement for the API program was that it must be conducted through engagement with the establishment or eminent persons in the relevant country. Among the four eminent persons from Malaysia who were invited to officiate at API fellowship programs, only two can be considered to have provided deep insights into matters of democracy: former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Musa Hitam (who spoke on democracy and Asian values in the first conference in 2000), and Perak Crown Prince, Sultan Nazrin Shah (who spoke on democracy and monarchy during the 2005 conference). While they deserve credit for their deep understandings, their backgrounds explain why they seemed to exercise caution in delivering their ideas.

According to several of the participants, the reservation of the speakers sometimes caused a dilemma for participants, as most of the people who joined the API program were not pro-regime. Moreover, there were several issues that led to disputes during the program, such as the coup d'état in Thailand in 2006.<sup>67</sup> Also, Benedict Anderson, who delivered a keynote speech during the API tenth anniversary commemoration, criticized the seemingly docile nature of the API. Most notable was the lack of attention to issues of regional politics and democracy in research conducted by API fellows. Anderson acknowledged the situation as unavoidable, as most foundations, including the

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<sup>64</sup> Amin Iskandar refused to be interviewed when contacted.

<sup>65</sup> Norhayati Kaprawi refused to be interviewed when contacted.

<sup>66</sup> Amir Muhammad, API Fellow 2003, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 5, 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Khoo Boo Teik, Conference Director of 10th Anniversary Regional Celebration for Asian Public Intellectuals Fellowships, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 9, 2018, and Mustafa K. Anuar, API Fellow 2002, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 27, 2019.

Nippon Foundation, were compelled to take a conservative stance in an effort to preserve their access to and a cordial relationship with host countries.<sup>68</sup> According to Mustafa K. Anuar:

The API program was more of a constructive engagement rather than critical engagement. Although the Nippon Foundation themselves did not censor any aspect of writing or publication, they also did not show any interest on sensitive topics such as deforestation and corruption in Sarawak that was raised by a participant from Sarawak. They were also not supportive of several joint statements made by API fellows regarding political issues.<sup>69</sup>

A comprehensive survey by API during its tenth anniversary received suggestions made by participants for the inclusion of democracy as a core theme. They ranked democracy in second place among eleven key issues described as Asia's principal intellectual challenges within the next five years.

The second limitation is the effect of dissemination. Research programs such as API are categorized by Sarah Bush<sup>70</sup> as non-regime-compatible, along with other sectors such as free elections, human rights, independent media, and political parties. The basis for Bush's argument is that democracy-related research conducted by think tanks, polling organizations, and universities can influence public opinion and eventually encourage civil disobedience toward the regime. In comparison with other sectors, Bush admitted that the research sector is the most ambiguous sector in her typology. There is merit to this argument, since it is quite difficult to determine whether an academic study can penetrate the public domain. Although the Nippon Foundation claimed that the program had produced a huge and impressive set of academic publications,<sup>71</sup> its impact and penetration of the public domain in Malaysia remains debatable. There is a consensus that social science academic works tend to be largely disregarded by policymakers in Malaysia. Moreover, the BN regime's unresponsive attitude toward studies that touched sensitivities and challenged the status quo made it difficult to conduct democracy-related research. Indonesia experiences a similar situation. I. Ketut Ardhana and Yakti Maunati, who observe the impact of international funding, such as that of the API program, on the development of social science in Indonesia, find that social scientists who conduct research centered on sensitive issues are

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<sup>68</sup> Ben Anderson, "Public Intellectuals," in *Asia: Identity, Vision and Position*, ed. Khoo Boo Teik and Tatsuya Tanami (Tokyo: Nippon Foundation, 2012), 44-53.

<sup>69</sup> Anuar, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail.

<sup>70</sup> Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*, 61.

<sup>71</sup> Tatsuya Tanami, "Ten Years After: An Overview of the API Program," in *Asia: Identity, Vision and Position*, ed. Khoo Boo Teik and Tatsuya Tanami (Tokyo: Nippon Foundation, 2012), 19.

regarded as threats to the government. And, on their part, policymakers show no interest in adopting social science research to solve pressing issues in the country.<sup>72</sup> Since the majority of API participants were academics, activists also addressed the issue of language in that “the language we use has to be more humble [because it is] heavily biased towards academia.”<sup>73</sup> Malaysia (like the Asian region, in general) has yet to have a specific platform or semi-academic journal capable of influencing public opinion in matters relating to democracy on a par with, for instance, the *Journal of Democracy*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *The National Interest*.

Finally, the dissemination of academic research was hampered by the use of English as the primary language in research publications produced by API fellows. During the tenth anniversary workshop, several participants addressed the widespread use of English at the expense of neglecting local languages in API programs.<sup>74</sup> Anyone familiar with Malaysian scholarships and activism immediately notices that almost all API fellows from Malaysia (including the six mentioned above) are known to use English as the primary language in their writing and activism. This brings us back to the issue of Malaysian prodemocracy CSOs as an urban product that is focused on middle-class concerns. Thus, these Malaysian fellows are limited to small circles of scholars and activists, who, in turn, have a limited audience, such as the urban segments and the English media. An important comparison can be made between API fellowships and the prestigious Reagan-Fascell democracy fellowship offered by the NED. The NED allows its fellows to produce their final product in any language, in order to maximize the outreach and dissemination of research products. Mustafa K. Anuar once suggested that API proceedings be translated and disseminated to every university library in Malaysia to gain a wider audience, but this remains a suggestion.<sup>75</sup>

The API program was ended in 2015. The termination caused many complaints among Malaysian scholars and activists due to its popularity. According to the Program Coordinator for the Nippon Foundation, Aya Fukuda, the API was terminated after operating for fifteen years because the organization could not afford to continue the project indefinitely and attention had shifted to countries in need such as Myanmar, Vietnam, and Cambodia.<sup>76</sup> Mustafa K. Anuar, however, has offered a different opinion:

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<sup>72</sup> I. Ketut Ardhana and Yekti Maunati, “Indonesian Experiences,” 131.

<sup>73</sup> Annie Shamila, “Concluding Plenary Session,” in *Asia: Identity, Vision and Position*, ed. Khoo Boo Teik and Tatsuya Tanami (Tokyo: Nippon Foundation, 2012), 137.

<sup>74</sup> The Nippon Foundation, “Survey Findings,” 172, and Gleyce Atienza, “Towards the Future: Group Presentations,” in *Asia: Identity, Vision and Position*, ed. Khoo Boo Teik and Tatsuya Tanami (Tokyo: Nippon Foundation, 2012), 124.

<sup>75</sup> Anuar, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail.

<sup>76</sup> Fukuda, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail.

The API program should be continued albeit with several changes and rebrandings. One of the striking issues with API is its huge cost pertaining to travel and accommodation expenses for participants such as business class tickets and five-star hotels. A participant once addressed that, “Isn’t it ironic when we discuss poverty issues in a five-star hotel?” For me, this program should be continued under the condition that it is done moderately to maintain its sustainability.<sup>77</sup>

***Sasakawa Peace Foundation: Asian Renaissance and Muslim Democrats***

The SPF aims to promote international understanding, thus its programs tend to focus on security, maritime concerns, extremism, and women’s empowerment—some of the largest challenges in the twenty-first century. In the fiscal year 2017, for example, the SPF provided grants in five areas: strengthening Japan–United States relations; increasing Japan’s visibility in Asia; increasing cooperation with Muslim countries; establishing maritime governance; and empowering women.<sup>78</sup> At the international level, SPF USA conducts programs to promote understanding between the United States and Japan on geopolitical issues, including funding for research related to democracy promotion.<sup>79</sup>

A survey published on the SPF’s website finds that the largest recipient of SPF grants is non-state actors from Japan and the United States, as well as a small number of non-state actors from Germany. The grants also included non-state actors from Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. From 2010 to 2016, Malaysia was the largest recipient of SPF funding, with a total of ¥400,079,439.<sup>80</sup> Table 2 shows SPF funding between 1999 and 2016 to five recipients, including a university research institute. Among the key themes addressed by these think tanks are ASEAN, good governance, and capacity building.

A focus of this essay lies in the context of SPF funding to IKD, which most closely resembles the definition of democracy assistance. IKD, a think tank known as “Anwar Ibrahim’s Institute” and headed by Anwar’s speechwriter, Khalid Jaafar,<sup>81</sup> focuses on providing space for intellectual discourse on key issues as a means to foster democracy. Contrary to Nippon’s API fellowships that subtly touched on issues of democracy, both the SPF programs displayed a clear emphasis on democracy-related concerns, albeit still falling within the

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<sup>77</sup> Anuar, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail.

<sup>78</sup> SPF, “Program Policy” (2018), <https://www.spf.org/e/profile/program.html> (accessed July 21, 2018).

<sup>79</sup> See Auslin and Bob, *U.S.—Japan Approaches to Democracy Promotion*.

<sup>80</sup> The starting year is marked as 1999 because the authors’ access to SPF Annual Reports on the SPF website begins only in that year.

<sup>81</sup> Khalid Jaafar refused to be interviewed when contacted.

Table 2. Sasakawa Peace Foundation Funding to Malaysia from 1999 to 2016

Recipient	Project	Amount (¥ Million)
Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER)	Global and Regional Economic Order	218,217
Institute for Policy Research (IKD)	Asian Renaissance/Muslim Democrats	129,308
Foreign Policy Study Group (FPSG)	Regional Integration in ASEAN	35,037
Malaysian Strategic Research Centre (MSRC)	Regional Security	8,805
Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Malaya	ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA)	8,710

Source: Sasakawa Peace Foundation, *Projects* (2018), <https://www.spf.org/e/projects/> (accessed July 21, 2018).

framework of intellectual discourse. The program coordinator for the SPF, Akiko Horiba, believes that non-state actors are responsible for engaging with other parties in filling the gap left by the Japanese government, which places great emphasis on Official Development Assistance instead of democracy assistance, so as not to be seen as overly vocal on democracy-related issues.<sup>82</sup>

The SPF seemed to adopt a strategy similar to that used by German Stiftungen, which “back several horses in the race; whichever is the victor, Germany wins.”<sup>83</sup> This was the case in 2008, when the Stiftungen engaged with Anwar, who worked behind the scenes for the opposition coalition in GE 2008—the first time BN was denied a two-thirds legislative majority—and led the opposition coalition to win the popular vote in GE 2013. It should be noted, however, that the relationship between Anwar and democracy promoters such as those in the United States and Germany already was established during his time in BN.<sup>84</sup> A similar trend can be observed in the context of Japanese non-state actors. When he was the deputy prime minister in the BN government, Anwar already had established his reputation in Japan and was invited to deliver a lecture on the role of civil society.<sup>85</sup> Anwar’s popularity

<sup>82</sup> Akiko Horiba, SPF Program Officer, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 30, 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, “The Rise of ‘Political Aid’,” in *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies, Regional Challenges*, ed. Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yunhan Chu, and Hung-Mao Tien (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 298.

<sup>84</sup> Muhamad Takiyuddin and Abdul Muein, “Educating Politics in Malaysia,” and id., “The United States Democracy Assistance in Malaysia.”

<sup>85</sup> JCIE, “Globalization, Governance, and Civil Society” (1998), <http://www.jcie.or.jp/books/abstracts/G/globalization.html> (accessed July 19, 2018).

in the international circuit following his release from prison in 2004 has accelerated the pace of regional track-two diplomacy, especially in the context of ASEAN.

The IKD started to receive funding from the Sasakawan Pan Asia Fund (SPAF) in 2006 for a program, “Asian Renaissance: Capacity Building for Future Leaders in Southeast Asia.” This project aimed to produce democratic Southeast Asian leaders through collaboration with intellectuals from Japan, ASEAN countries, the United States, and Europe. Cooperation between the SPF and Anwar began as a top-down initiative when the chairman of the SPF, Hanyu Sasakawa, became interested in the idea of an Asian Renaissance, which was proposed by Anwar in his book published in 1997. The idea was later realized by the Program Coordinator of the SPF, Akira Matsunaga, and a Malaysian citizen working at the SPF, Sim Yee Lau, who had a relationship with PKR leadership.<sup>86</sup>

The Asian Renaissance program had two key themes, Capacity Building for Future Leaders in Southeast Asia (2004–2006) and Empowering Asian Democracy (2014). The program aimed to educate future leaders of ASEAN about issues related to Asia, such as democracy and regional cooperation. A program called Asian Dialogue Society (ADS) was organized to empower young leaders from Asia. Apart from Anwar and Khalid, other ADS advisors who frequented the program included individuals with huge influence in ASEAN regional diplomacy and relations, such as Surin Pitsuwan, M. Rajaretnam, Amitav Acharya (academician), Hun Sen (prime minister of Cambodia), and Dewi Fortuna Anwar (academician at the Habibie Centre). Starting between 2014 and 2016, the Asian Renaissance 2.0 program was renamed the World Forum of Muslim Democrats to serve as a platform for Muslim and non-Muslim leaders, intellectuals, and professionals for the purpose of expanding the discourse on democracy, justice, freedom, and development. The program held three conventions—in Kuala Lumpur in November 2014, Indonesia in 2015, and Japan in 2016—with the cooperation of the Habibie Centre as well as Turkey’s Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA). Throughout the five years of this project, Anwar was among the key personalities who pursued its goals by holding workshops to discuss and debate ideas regarding regional young leadership.<sup>87</sup> Figures such as Surin Pisuwan and former president of Indonesia, B. J. Habibie, were close friends of Anwar during his time as deputy prime minister. The relationship between Anwar and Habibie, for instance, had developed since the 1990s in their mutual effort to realize the idea of Southeast Asian Civil Society (*Masyarakat Madani Asia Tenggara*).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Lau Sim Yee, former official for SPF Malaysia Program, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, August 28, 2018, and Horiba, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail.

<sup>87</sup> SPF, “Asian Renaissance: Capacity Building for Future Leaders in Southeast Asia,” [https://www.spf.org/spaf/projects/project\\_16429.html](https://www.spf.org/spaf/projects/project_16429.html) (accessed July 24, 2018).

<sup>88</sup> Michael R. J. Vatikiotis, *Indonesian Politics under Suharto*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 222–223.

Concerning the effectiveness of SPF programs, this essay submits that the SPF was hindered by several limitations, despite having a clearer democracy theme than the API. First, the SPF was constrained by a diplomatic code that prevents it from disrupting the bilateral relations between Malaysia and Japan. This limitation was observed when Anwar was barred from entering Japan to attend a program held by the SPF in 2014.<sup>89</sup> Anwar as well as the PKR, which aggressively responded to the prohibition, seemed to imply that there was pressure from the Malaysian government. But the allegation was not well-received by either government, and critics blamed Anwar for his mistake in not applying for a special visa.<sup>90</sup> According to Akiko Horiba, this incident nevertheless did not disrupt the relationship between the SPF and the Japanese government due to the close ties between the SPF and Shinzo Abe's administration. Despite its status as a private foundation, the SPF was considered a "unique organization," as it was perceived as pro-government and had extensive access to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.<sup>91</sup> Such closeness is different from non-state actors such as the NED, which has clearer autonomy and sometimes conflicts with state actors due to its method of democracy promotion.<sup>92</sup>

Second, the nature of SPF programs was along the lines of assistance to a particular political party and benefited only PKR members and individuals who were close to the IKD director, Khalid Jaafar. While the IRI and the NDI under the NED conduct programs that cater to all major political parties in Malaysia,<sup>93</sup> the SPF, by contrast, did not adopt a multipartisan approach. SPF programs were limited to party members and did not include other target groups, despite the claim made by Khalid that both programs had succeeded in creating "ministers, head of states, deputy ministers, state executive councilors, parliament members, and state assemblymen."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> "Anwar Denied Entry to Tokyo" (January 19, 2014), *The Star* online, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/01/19/anwar-deported-japan/> (accessed July 24, 2018).

<sup>90</sup> "Japan Says Malaysia's Anwar Failed to Apply for Visa," *The Edge Markets*, January 21, 2014; Anisah Shukry, "Foreign Ministry Helped Anwar Re-Enter Japan" (March 20, 2014), <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2014/03/20/foreign-ministry-helped-anwar-re-enter-japan/> (accessed September 2, 2019); Huan Cheng Guan, "A Sense of Entitlement All the Way to Japan," *Malaysiakini* (January 21, 2014), <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/252329> (accessed September 2, 2019); and Japanese Foreign Official, personal interview by Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Horiba, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail. Anwar returned to Japan on February 27, 2014, to proceed with the Muslim Democrats presentation, after receiving a formal apology by SPF Chairman Jiro Hanyu regarding the issue.

<sup>92</sup> Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*, 68.

<sup>93</sup> Muhamad Takiyuddin and Abdul Muein, "The United States Democracy Assistance in Malaysia."

<sup>94</sup> Ida Nadirah Ibrahim, "Haziq Black Sheep in PKR Think Tank, Says Azmin Aide," *The Malay Mail* (June 18, 2019), <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/06/18/haziq-black-sheep-in-pkr-think-tank-says-azmins-aide/1763286> (accessed September 2, 2019).

Most importantly, the idea of Muslim Democrats that was introduced in 2014 has yet to take a clear direction and continues to receive mixed reaction from the public. Turkey's involvement in the program also raised concerns due to the country's questionable human rights record as well as the recent clampdown on democratic space and the imprisonment of academics and activists by Recep Erdogan following the failed coup attempt in 2016. Consequently, Anwar's good relationship with Erdogan invited both domestic and international criticism.<sup>95</sup> Maszlee Malik and Syaza Farhana argue that the idea of Muslim Democrats advocated by figures such as Rashid Ghannouchi (Tunisia) and Anwar seems to deny the fact that Islam itself has recognized aspects of democracy.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, there exist moral ambiguities in the application of this idea vis-à-vis Anwar's realpolitik. Such criticism should not be regarded as exaggerated, considering Anwar's inconsistent credentials as a democrat. Current developments also indicate that the PKR is the most problematic component party in Pakatan Harapan due to its internal conflict. Although the PKR is widely portrayed as a political party founded on intellectual and enlightenment principles, these principles are overshadowed by the intense power struggle within the party.

The relations between the IKD and the SPF ended in 2017 due to the change in the SPF's administration. In addition, subsequent program officers showed no interest in continuing the program.<sup>97</sup> Such a situation demonstrates the risk to programs that are based on personal factors. Sim Yee Lau expressed his regret over the termination of the program because the SPF did not expect that Pakatan Harapan would succeed in GE14 and that Anwar would be released.<sup>98</sup> Currently, the SPF is not funding any program related to Malaysia, apart from a program related to conflict resolution in Southern Thailand, which is the SPF's long-term project.<sup>99</sup> While the SPF is said to be considering the possibility of cooperating with the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, to date there is no significant development in the SPF's activities in Malaysia. The only program held by the SPF after GE14 was a lecture by a controversial Malaysian scholar, Faisal Tehrani, on the development of democracy in Malaysia.

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<sup>95</sup> See Amanda Hodge, "Anwar Defends His Praise for Turkish Strongman Erdogan," *The Australian*, June 30, 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Maszlee Malik and Syaza Farhana Mohamad Shukri, "From Political Islam to Democrat Muslim: A Comparison between Rashid Ghannouchi and Anwar Ibrahim," *Intellectual Discourse* 26, no. 1 (2018): 161-188.

<sup>97</sup> Horiba, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail.

<sup>98</sup> Lau, personal communication to Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail.

<sup>99</sup> Malaysia is currently acting as the facilitator for conflict resolution in Southern Thailand, headed by the former Inspector-General of Police, Rahim Noor.

## Conclusion

This essay examines two leading Japanese non-state actors that promoted democratic ideas and values in Malaysia, the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. Japan's character as a low-profile democracy promoter—that is largely founded on its broad interpretation of democracy and its tendency to prioritize state actors within the framework of democracy assistance—significantly influences the approach of both of these non-state actors. Thus, it can be argued that Japanese non-state actors are accommodating and serve the role of complementing rather than challenging, in contrast with the American or German non-state actors such as the National Endowment for Democracy and *Stiftungen* Germany, which emphasize engagement with the grassroots community in their strategies for the promotion of democracy, especially in Malaysia. Non-state actors such as the Nippon Foundation and the SPF are inclined to adopt an accommodative approach so as not to disrupt the good bilateral relations between Japan and the recipient country. API fellowships, for instance, were based on a regional constructive engagement principle and refrained from addressing sensitive democracy-related issues, especially among ASEAN countries. Final products in research-based programs have limited effect due to the low reception of social science research and rigid mediums of dissemination. The SPF, which offered a clearer vision of democracy than the API, also was constrained by its special relationship with the Japanese government. The SPF's focus on a single recipient (i.e., Anwar Ibrahim and the PKR) further limited its outreach to a wider audience. Moreover, within the public domain, there was inconsistency between the ideas of an Asian Renaissance and Muslim Democrats and the implementation and practice of them.

In this context, Anwar's claim that Japanese non-state actors have played a prominent role in democracy promotion can be regarded only as an act of public relations, considering his close relationship with the SPF. We, however, are not implying that both programs did not have a significant impact overall. Considering the low profile of Japanese non-state actors in global democracy promotion, special credit should be given to both the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation for their initiatives for the benefit of ASEAN. Such initiatives parallel the stance taken by the Malaysian government, which tends to be hostile to politically oriented programs, including the possibility of creating a domestic backlash, which led to the campaign to close space for non-state actors such as the NED, *Stiftungen*, and OSF between 2011 and 2016. The emphasis on regional cooperation advocated by both foundations can be viewed as a significant contribution to fostering track-two diplomacy between countries and parallels Japan's initiative in channeling assistance to ASEAN.

Existing data, however, indicate that both the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation have halted their democracy-related programs in

Malaysia. This raises a question about the role that Japanese non-state actors could take in assisting the democratic transition of Malaysia. The current trend seems to contradict the assumption that democracy assistance will flourish following a political transition, examples being the cases of Indonesia, Tunisia, and Myanmar.<sup>100</sup> Right after GE14, promoters such as IRI made statements urging Western countries and their Asia Pacific allies, such as Japan and Australia, to provide the needed assistance and expertise to consolidate the political transition in Malaysia, especially in the areas where the “new state administration [has] limited governing experience.”<sup>101</sup> Although IRI’s statement seems to focus on the role of state actors, it is imperative for Japanese non-state actors to also increase their participation in strengthening Malaysia’s democratic transition.

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<sup>100</sup> Bush, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*; Thomas Carothers, “Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose” (2015), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/01/13/democracy-aid-at-25-time-to-choose/hzao> (accessed July 4, 2016); and Edward Aspinall, “Assessing Democracy Assistance: Indonesia,” FRIDE Project Report (2010), [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/130783/IP\\_WMD\\_Indonesia\\_ENG\\_jul10.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/130783/IP_WMD_Indonesia_ENG_jul10.pdf) (accessed August 3, 2016).

<sup>101</sup> Matthew Hays and Daniel Twining, “Malaysia’s Fragile Democratic Revival” (May 24, 2018), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Malaysia-s-fragile-democratic-revival2> (accessed August 21, 2018).