Contesting Regionalism: Justice, Democracy, and Legitimacy in ASEAN and the EU

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualizes regionalism as a contested political arena by comparing the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) through the lenses of justice, democracy, and legitimacy. It argues that legitimacy in regional governance emerges not only from material power but also from recognition, cultural memory, and symbolic contestation. Drawing on theories of multipolarity and symbolic politics, the study examines how regional orders negotiate moral and political authority in an evolving global balance. The EU's institutionalization of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law through binding treaties has not eliminated its democratic deficits, which persist under the pressures of populism, neoliberal orthodoxy, and technocratic governance. In contrast, ASEAN's principles of sovereignty, consensus, and non-interference constrain its ability to enforce justice and human rights, as reflected in its limited responses to the Rohingya crisis and the 2021 Myanmar coup. Across both regions, rising civil society engagement and progressive critiques reveal regionalism as a dynamic field of competing visions for solidarity and accountability. By situating the EU and ASEAN within a shifting multipolar order, this article contends that the legitimacy of regionalism depends on evolving from elite-driven frameworks toward genuinely people-centred governance that embeds democracy and justice as mutually reinforcing conditions of legitimacy.
Keywords: *ASEAN, European Union, Regionalism, Democracy, Justice*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengonseptualisasikan regionalisme sebagai arena politik yang diperebutkan dengan membandingkan Uni Eropa (UE) dan Perhimpunan Bangsa-Bangsa Asia Tenggara (ASEAN) melalui konsep keadilan, demokrasi, dan legitimasi. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa legitimasi dalam tata kelola regional tidak hanya muncul dari kekuatan material, tetapi juga dari pengakuan, memori kultural, dan kontestasi simbolik. Dengan memanfaatkan teori multipolaritas dan politik simbolik, studi ini menelaah bagaimana tatanan regional menegosiasikan otoritas moral dan politik dalam keseimbangan global yang terus berubah. Institusionalisasi demokrasi, hak asasi manusia, dan supremasi hukum oleh Uni Eropa melalui perjanjian yang mengikat belum berhasil menghapus defisit demokratis yang masih bertahan di bawah tekanan populisme, ortodoksi neoliberal, dan tata kelola teknokratis. Sebaliknya, prinsip-prinsip kedaulatan, konsensus, dan non-intervensi ASEAN membatasi kemampuannya dalam menegakkan keadilan dan hak asasi manusia, sebagaimana tercermin dari respon terbatas terhadap krisis Rohingya dan kudeta Myanmar tahun 2021. Di kedua kawasan tersebut, meningkatnya keterlibatan masyarakat sipil dan kritik progresif memperlihatkan bahwa regionalisme merupakan medan dinamis bagi berbagai visi yang saling bersaing mengenai solidaritas dan akuntabilitas. Dengan menempatkan UE dan ASEAN dalam tatanan multipolar yang tengah bergeser, artikel ini menegaskan bahwa legitimasi regionalisme bergantung pada kemampuan untuk berevolusi dari kerangka yang digerakkan oleh elit menuju tata kelola yang benar-benar berpusat pada rakyat, yang memadukan demokrasi dan keadilan sebagai syarat-syarat legitimasi yang saling berkaitan.
Kata Kunci:.ASEAN, Uni Eropa, Regionalisme, Demokrasi, Keadilan

INTRODUCTION

Regional cooperation has developed into more than a diplomatic goal; it has become a strategy for survival. Countries increasingly unite to address crises that no single state can handle on its own. Both the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) seek to create stronger and more resilient communities. However, they pursue this goal through different political experiences and institutional principles. This difference underscores the need to study how regional frameworks attempt to balance sovereignty, justice, and democracy, especially as global challenges demand both flexibility and legitimacy.

The EU emerged from the devastation of war and was created to prevent future political and economic conflicts through regional integration. Over time, it built a distinctive identity based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These commitments were expressed in the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria and later formalized in the Lisbon Treaty as legal duties for all member states (European Union, 2012). Ian Manners (2002) described this as the EU's "normative power," meaning its influence in global politics derives from values rather than military or economic force. This development shows how regional institutions can turn historical trauma into a foundation for collective identity, strengthening the EU's image as a community built on shared values.

Yet, the EU's normative identity faces ongoing challenges. The growing politicization of policymaking, especially within the European Parliament (EP), has shaped debates about social legislation and raised questions about whether the Union is moving toward a more "social Europe" (Copeland, Elomäki, & Gaweda, 2024). Politicization can serve as a "filter" that brings social policy issues such as welfare, labour, and justice into focus within EU governance. However, political divisions and party rivalries often limit ambitious reforms, revealing how fragile efforts to establish a stronger social dimension within the EU can be (Copeland et al., 2024). This tension shows that the vision of a "social Europe" depends on maintaining a delicate balance between integrationist goals and the persistent influence of national interests and ideological differences.

Politicization in the European Parliament (EP) reveals the two-sided nature of democratic contestation in regional governance. It opens opportunities to expand debates beyond economic integration and to promote justice and social solidarity. However, uneven accountability systems and persistent partisan conflicts can obstruct progress, reducing the EU's ability to realize its normative goals (Copeland et al., 2024). These developments show that although the EU continues to present itself as a normative power (Manners, 2002; European Union, 2012), its direction is still shaped by internal disagreements, political tensions, and the ongoing negotiation of what it means to build a truly "social Europe." In this way, the EU's social dimension is not a straightforward institutional plan but a contested political process in which different visions of solidarity and integration continuously interact and evolve.

These values did not appear without context. In Europe, they emerged from centuries of political conflict, Enlightenment ideas, and social movements that demanded rights and representation, later embedded in laws and policies. This long history helps explain why the EU was able to incorporate democracy, human rights, and the rule of law into binding treaties, even though their implementation remains debated. In contrast, ASEAN developed from anti-colonial movements and the strategic tensions of the Cold War. This origin shaped a model of regional cooperation that prioritizes national sovereignty and the principle of non-interference. As a result, ASEAN's institutional design reflects cautious pragmatism. It resists external influence and promotes stability but also limits collective action on justice and democracy.

Despite these constraints, ASEAN has not completely ignored issues of justice and social protection. The ASEAN Secretariat has encouraged cooperation on matters such as labour rights and migrant workers, showing an aspiration for a more inclusive regionalism (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.). Still, compared with the EU, ASEAN's commitment to democracy and human rights remains largely aspirational. Because it relies on consensus-based decision-making and lacks strong enforcement mechanisms, member states often refrain from

addressing one another's human rights violations or democratic setbacks. This creates a continuing gap between ASEAN's stated commitments and its actual ability to promote democratic norms, raising concerns about the credibility of its institutional framework

The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) reflects the tensions within ASEAN's approach to human rights. Although often viewed as weak, AICHR has been analyzed through a revised Spiral Model, which highlights its potential to promote and protect rights while operating within ASEAN's consensus-based system (Collins & Soon, 2023). The revised Spiral Model emphasizes persuasion and argumentative dialogue as key mechanisms of change and identifies specific conditions that determine whether Representatives can turn rhetorical commitments into real compliance with human rights standards. In this sense, AICHR is not only a symbolic institution but also a contested space where norms are interpreted and where institutional evolution may occur.

Collins and Soon (2023) outline five main conditions that affect AICHR's effectiveness. These include disagreements over the interpretation of its Terms of Reference and the "ASEAN Way," decentralized governance that limits coordination, social vulnerability that weakens legitimacy, and material vulnerability caused by funding limitations. These structural and institutional challenges restrict AICHR's capacity for decisive action. However, contestation itself, whether over mandates, procedures, or interpretations, can create opportunities for gradual progress. The Myanmar crisis, for example, has intensified discussions about whether the principle of non-interference can be reconsidered during severe human rights violations, suggesting that ASEAN's norms may be more adaptable than often assumed.

This contrast with the European Union (EU) does not mean ASEAN should replicate the EU's institutions. Rather, Europe's experience raises key questions for Southeast Asia. Can shared values meaningfully shape ASEAN's future? Can economic cooperation develop into a more people-oriented framework? And can ASEAN reconcile its commitment to non-interference with the urgent need to protect rights and democratic space in the region? AICHR's case sharpens these questions by showing that institutional weakness does not eliminate the possibility of gradual reform through strategic reinterpretation and political contestation (Collins & Soon, 2023). In this regard, ASEAN's development shows that regionalism is shaped not only by institutional design but also by the continuing efforts of states, civil society, and transnational actors to redefine norms and practices from within.

The regional arena is not a neutral environment but a contested space where different narratives, priorities, and ideologies compete for legitimacy. The European Union (EU) experience shows that embedding values within regional frameworks is achievable, but only when supported by strong political will and consistent accountability. For ASEAN, the main challenge extends beyond economic resilience to building a regional identity grounded in justice, solidarity, and the participation of its people (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.). The cautious optimism expressed by Collins and Soon (2023) further suggests that, despite its limitations, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) could serve as a platform for gradual change if its Representatives use contestation strategically to reinterpret existing norms. Understanding these processes enriches wider discussions about the future of regionalism in an increasingly complex and multipolar world.

This article is organized into four main sections, each addressing different aspects of regionalism's contested dynamics. The first section explores the historical roots of EU and ASEAN integration, emphasizing their distinct political contexts and institutional developments. The second section focuses on the EU's frameworks for justice and democracy, examining the growth of its normative power alongside challenges such as populist backlash, technocratic decision-making, and legitimacy crises. The third section analyses ASEAN's adherence to the principle of non-interference, the institutional constraints of bodies like AICHR, and its emerging aspirations for inclusivity in the face of authoritarian resilience and uncivil societal pressures. The final section offers comparative insights, placing both organizations within a multipolar and symbolically contested global order, and considers how ASEAN might reimagine regionalism to become more people-centred, democratic, and just.

LITERATURE REVIEW

European Regionalism: Normative Power and Institutional Values

The European Union (EU) is often described as a regional organization whose legitimacy is based on shared values rather than material power. Manners (2002) introduced the idea of "normative power Europe" to explain how the EU influences global affairs through the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law instead of relying on military or economic force. These principles were formally established in major developments such as the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria and later codified in the Lisbon Treaty (European Union, 2012). Scholars argue that this normative orientation reflects Europe's long history of political struggle, Enlightenment philosophy, and social movements that demanded rights and representation, which were later embedded in laws and policies (Monnet, 1976; Schuman, 1950). This literature therefore emphasizes the EU's ability to turn its historical challenges into a shared identity, while also questioning how firmly these values are upheld in practice.

Democratic Deficits and Populist Backlash in the EU

Although the EU aspires to uphold normative values, many critical scholars point out its "democratic deficit" and its growing susceptibility to populist backlash. Studies conducted after the global financial crisis indicate that increasing inequality and declining trust in institutions have fueled Euroscepticism and strengthened right-wing populist movements (Algan et al., 2018). Calhoun (2017) earlier viewed Brexit as both a nationalist break and a social response to supranational elitism, reflecting public frustration with governance centered in Brussels. In addition, the EU has faced pressure to adjust its liberal-democratic principles to the changing geopolitical context of multipolarity, shaped by tensions with Russia and the rivalry between the United States and China (Jopp & Pollak, 2024). Overall, this body of research shows that regionalism based on shared values remains exposed to internal disputes and external challenges, highlighting the fragile and conditional nature of the EU's normative agenda.

Progressive Critiques and Left-Wing Perspectives

Although right-wing criticism often dominates public debate, left-wing parties across Europe have also consistently criticized the EU as a neoliberal project. Bieler and Morton (2001) argue that European integration was designed as a neoliberal restructuring that reduced social protection. In the same vein, Streeck (2015) points to the absence of democratic control in monetary integration and austerity measures, which weakened accountability and limited popular democracy. More recent studies indicate that left-wing parties, especially in Southern Europe, have adopted hybrid strategies that blend progressive social goals with pragmatic responses to political conditions (Lourenço, 2022). Furthermore, party documents such as those of La France Insoumise (2019) and Die Linke (2019) demonstrate efforts to oppose neoliberal treaties while advancing a vision of a "social Europe" based on humanism, environmental justice, and solidarity. Together, these perspectives show that regionalism should not be seen as a fixed neoliberal structure but as a dynamic and contested political space open to calls for justice and accountability.

ASEAN Regionalism: Sovereignty, Non-Interference, and Rights Limitations

Unlike the EU, ASEAN developed in the aftermath of colonialism and the Cold War, creating an institutional framework strongly influenced by principles of sovereignty and non-interference. This "ASEAN Way" has contributed to regional stability but has also constrained collective action on human rights violations and democratic decline (Ruggi, 2023). Even so, ASEAN has gradually expanded its focus beyond economic integration. The ASEAN Secretariat (n.d.) has introduced initiatives on workers' rights and labor migration, showing an intention to promote a more inclusive form of regionalism. The creation of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR, n.d.) further marks a formal attempt

to integrate human rights into regional governance. However, because AICHR's mandate is limited to issuing recommendations without enforcement authority, it has faced criticism, especially during the Rohingya crisis and the 2021 Myanmar coup (Human Rights Watch, 2020). These developments reveal ASEAN's persistent gap between its rhetorical commitments and its actual capacity to enforce them.

Regionalism in a Multipolar and Contested Order

Recent scholarship argues that regionalism must be understood in the context of a changing multipolar world, where narratives, identities, and symbolic struggles carry as much significance as material power. Badie (2019, 2025) further explains that humiliation, cultural memory, and recognition politics influence legitimacy in international relations, challenging governance models dominated by elites and states. For ASEAN, this suggests that its consensus-based diplomacy risks losing relevance unless it includes the diverse perspectives of civil society and grassroots actors. Comparative research shows that both the EU and ASEAN must adjust their approaches to regionalism: the EU needs to confront its internal democratic weaknesses, while ASEAN must balance its sovereignty-based norms with growing demands for people-centred governance (Tempo.co, 2023; Vietnam Law Magazine, 2025). These dynamics indicate that the future of regionalism depends not only on institutional reform but also on the ability to incorporate diverse social expectations into legitimate political frameworks.

Research on the EU highlights both the promise and the fragility of embedding values in regional institutions, particularly under conditions of inequality and populist resistance (Algan et al., 2018; Calhoun, 2017). In contrast, ASEAN studies show that sovereignty-oriented regionalism limits collective responses to crises, even as some people-centred initiatives begin to emerge (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.; AICHR, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Comparative analyses often rely on a binary view that contrasts EU exceptionalism with ASEAN particularism, overlooking how justice and democracy might advance in settings where sovereignty remains central. Therefore, this article seeks to bridge that gap by positioning ASEAN within broader debates on normative regionalism, drawing from EU experiences and left critiques to propose a more inclusive, people-centred framework in Southeast Asia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a comparative case study design, focusing on the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as two regional bodies that grapple with questions of justice, democracy, and legitimacy. By juxtaposing the EU's trajectory, shaped by integration through shared values such as the Copenhagen Criteria and the Lisbon Treaty (European Union, 2012), with ASEAN's consensus-based, sovereignty-sensitive model (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.), the research highlights both convergences and divergences in regionalism. Additionally, the comparative framework enables a systematic evaluation of how institutional commitments to democracy and justice are articulated and operationalized across two distinct historical and political contexts (Manners, 2002). In doing so, the study highlights that regional identities are not fixed but instead constantly negotiated in response to crises and shifting global dynamics.

Methodologically, the study relies on document and discourse analysis, complemented by process tracing. Foundational treaties, summit declarations, institutional reports, and policy statements from both ASEAN and the EU serve as primary sources of information. In contrast, speeches by political leaders, critical media, and NGO reports provide insight into how narratives of justice, sovereignty, and solidarity are constructed and contested (Calhoun, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Thus, through discourse analysis, the study uncovers the framing and legitimization of regional values, while process tracing reconstructs decision-making pathways during critical episodes such as the EU's response to the financial crisis and Brexit (Algan et al., 2018; BBC News, 2016), and ASEAN's handling of the Myanmar coup and the Rohingya crisis (Ruggi, 2023; ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human

Rights, n.d.). This multi-method approach strengthens the analysis by linking normative aspirations with the practical realities of policymaking and crisis management.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Conceptual Anchors: Justice, Democracy, and Regionalism

This study is grounded in discussions of justice and democracy as essential components of regional integration. The European Union (EU) has long been recognized as a "normative power" that promotes values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law beyond its borders (Manners, 2002). These principles were formalized through legal instruments like the Copenhagen Criteria and the Lisbon Treaty, which made them binding on all member states (European Union, 2012). However, the EU experience shows that embedding justice and democracy within regional institutions is a complex and contested process. It is continuously shaped by crises, populist movements, and structural inequalities that challenge the credibility of its normative claims (Algan et al., 2018; Calhoun, 2017). These conditions demonstrate that even in well-established institutional systems, the realization of normative ideals depends on broader socio-political struggles.

In contrast, ASEAN regionalism has been influenced by a sovereignty-oriented approach that prioritizes consensus and non-interference, while making only aspirational commitments to human rights and democratic principles (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.; Ruggi, 2023). This institutional culture has contributed to regional stability and the protection of state sovereignty but has also restricted progress on justice and democracy. The gap between ASEAN's rhetorical commitments and its weak enforcement mechanisms highlights how its pragmatic model limits the ability to institutionalize normative values in the same way as the EU. Taken together, these perspectives offer a conceptual basis for comparing how regional organizations define and implement justice and democracy under different political contexts, revealing both the potential of value-based regionalism and the constraints that arise from sovereignty-sensitive forms of integration.

Analytical Dimensions: Normative Claims, Institutional Design, and Democratic Deficits

The framework introduces three analytical dimensions for comparing the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The first dimension, normative claims, examines how each regional organization defines justice and democracy. The EU expresses these values through binding legal commitments, whereas ASEAN conveys them primarily through aspirational declarations (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.; European Union, 2012). The second dimension, institutional design, explores the mechanisms that support or fail to support these commitments. The EU enforces its principles through supranational law, while ASEAN's human rights framework remains limited, as reflected in the narrow mandate of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2020). The third dimension, democratic deficits, focuses on the gap between elites and citizens in regional governance. In the EU, this gap has deepened due to the financial crisis, the rise of populist movements, and critiques from both right-wing and left-wing actors (Streeck, 2015; Lourenço, 2022; Die Linke, 2019; La France Insoumise, 2019). In Southeast Asia, it persists because decision-making remains concentrated among elites and opportunities for civil society participation are limited (Tempo.co, 2023). Taken together, these dimensions suggest that the legitimacy of regionalism depends not only on institutional structures but also on the capacity to align normative principles with practices that genuinely empower people.

Democratic deficits are particularly visible across ASEAN member states, where rights violations continue to occur. In Myanmar, the military commits war crimes and detains Aung San Suu Kyi; Cambodia restricts political opposition; Indonesia undermines its judiciary; the Philippines allows extrajudicial killings; Thailand's military maintains strong political influence; and Vietnam and Laos intensify repression of activists (Pearson, 2024). These national conditions show that ASEAN's sovereignty-first approach, rooted in the "ASEAN Way," allows

governments to evade accountability while weakening regional commitments to justice and democracy. In doing so, ASEAN not only institutionalizes consensus but also normalizes impunity by shielding rights-violating states from scrutiny.

As an institution, ASEAN has remained largely ineffective in addressing human rights crises, particularly the continuing atrocities in Myanmar (Pearson, 2024). The limited authority of AICHR and ASEAN's strict consensus rule have produced institutional paralysis, preventing timely and decisive responses to severe violations. This ongoing gap between ambitious declarations and weak implementation reinforces the perception that ASEAN lacks both the institutional strength and political will to function as a genuinely people-centred organization. The main challenge, therefore, is not only to reform formal mechanisms but also to redefine ASEAN's normative commitments so that they can be translated into credible and enforceable actions that uphold democracy and human rights across the region.

Comparative Approach: Learning Across Regions in a Multipolar World

The framework uses a comparative regionalism approach that situates ASEAN and the European Union (EU) within a changing multipolar global environment (Jopp & Pollak, 2024; Badie, 2019, 2025). Rather than assuming EU exceptionalism, this analysis understands regionalism as a political arena in which states, elites, civil society, and grassroots actors seek to influence how integration is interpreted and pursued. This approach also highlights that legitimacy in regionalism depends not only on institutional arrangements but also on symbolic struggles over recognition, memory, and identity, which are central to Badie's (2019, 2025) account of multipolar politics. By acknowledging these factors, the study avoids teleological comparisons that treat the EU as a universal template and instead recognizes that regional pathways differ because they emerge from distinct historical experiences and political conditions.

The lessons from this comparison do not aim to replicate any institutional model. Instead, they identify potential routes toward people-centred regionalism that integrate justice and democracy while respecting concerns about sovereignty. Through a combination of insights from EU debates on normative power (Manners, 2002; European Union, 2012), critiques of democratic deficits (Algan et al., 2018; Calhoun, 2017; Streeck, 2015; Lourenço, 2022), and the evolving practices within ASEAN (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.; Ruggi, 2023; Collins & Soon, 2023), this study proposes a framework for evaluating whether and how regional organizations can shift from elite-driven cooperation to more inclusive governance grounded in solidarity and rights. In this way, comparative regionalism becomes a means not only to describe institutional similarities and differences but also to examine how contested forms of integration can develop into more democratic and socially responsive systems within an increasingly multipolar world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Divergent Foundations of Regionalism: EU Normative Power vs. ASEAN Sovereignty-First

The comparative results highlight the distinct trajectories of the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in conceptualising and institutionalising regionalism. The EU emerged from the devastation of World War II with the ambition to prevent further conflict through political and economic integration. Over the decades, it has institutionalized commitments to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law through frameworks such as the Copenhagen Criteria and the Lisbon Treaty (European Union, 2012). Moreover, these commitments were not accidental innovations but rather the culmination of Europe's centuries-long struggles, shaped by Enlightenment ideals and the mobilization of social movements for rights and representation (Monnet, 1976; Schuman, 1950). As Manners (2002) famously argued, this trajectory has positioned the EU as a "normative power," one that projects influence not through coercion but through the diffusion of shared values.

This normative orientation has strengthened the EU's identity in international affairs by allowing it to claim legitimacy as a value-driven actor. Thus, the EU's capacity to frame itself

as a guardian of liberal democracy, human rights, and the rule of law has been central to its self-image and global role. However, this also exposes the EU to criticism whenever its practices fall short of its principles, as seen in its uneven responses to migration crises, financial instability, and conflicts such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The notion of "normative power Europe" therefore remains contested, highlighting the tension between ideals embedded in treaties and the realities of geopolitical and domestic constraints (Manners, 2002; Puglierin, 2024). Accordingly, this tension illustrates how even strong institutional frameworks must continually reconcile rhetoric with practice to maintain credibility.

ASEAN, by contrast, developed in the postcolonial and Cold War contexts, giving rise to what is commonly referred to as the "ASEAN Way." Additionally, this model prioritizes sovereignty, consensus, and non-interference, privileging regional stability over direct intervention in domestic political matters (Ruggi, 2023). While this design has been effective in reducing interstate conflict and building trust among historically divided nations, it has also limited ASEAN's ability to institutionalize justice and democracy in the same way as the EU. Hence, the ASEAN Secretariat has initiated cooperation on labour rights and migration (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.), signalling incremental progress toward inclusivity. However, these measures remain primarily aspirational, with few binding mechanisms that would allow ASEAN to enforce commitments across member states.

The limits of ASEAN's institutional architecture are evident during crises. Moreover, the AICHR, for example, lacks enforcement authority. So, they are just able to give recommendations. Thus, it became a weakness highlighted during both the Rohingya humanitarian crisis and the 2021 Myanmar coup (AICHR, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Still, these episodes underscore how ASEAN's sovereignty-first approach ensures resilience but restricts its capacity to act decisively in the face of rights violations and democratic backsliding. In addition, without stronger enforcement mechanisms and a shift toward more people-centred regionalism, ASEAN risks being perceived as a primarily economic organization, lacking the political legitimacy required to address social and humanitarian challenges in Southeast Asia. For that reason, this divergence from the EU also reflects what Badie (2019; 2025) terms the dynamics of Multipolarity and Symbolic Politics, where legitimacy is shaped not only by institutional design and material capacity but also by the symbolic weight of recognition, humiliation, and historical memory in contested regional orders.

Democratic Deficits and Populist Backlash

The findings reveal that both the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) face significant challenges to their democratic legitimacy. However, these challenges manifest in distinct ways. In the EU, the so-called "democratic deficit" has been magnified by episodes such as Brexit, which signalled profound disillusionment with supranational authority and elite-driven governance (BBC News, 2016; Calhoun, 2017). Moreover, the referendum not only underscored the growing distance between EU institutions and European citizens but also exposed deep fractures in the integration project itself, highlighting how fragile democratic legitimacy can become when institutions fail to connect with broader publics. Therefore, this episode illustrates how moments of direct democratic consultation, rather than reinforcing EU legitimacy, can sometimes exacerbate institutional weaknesses and divisions within the Union.

Populist movements across Europe gained momentum in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which revealed structural inequalities and eroded public trust in EU institutions. In this case, Algan et al. (2018) demonstrated how socio-economic inequality, combined with declining trust, created fertile ground for right-wing populism and Euroscepticism. In this context, citizens increasingly perceived the EU as privileging economic orthodoxy and technocratic solutions over democratic responsiveness. Then, these dynamics illustrate how normative commitments to justice and democracy, central to the EU's self-presentation as a "community of values," can be undermined by neoliberal economic structures and managerial governance that limit participatory inclusion. As a result, populist actors successfully framed

themselves as defenders of sovereignty and popular will against a distant and technocratic Brussels.

Consequently, the EU now faces a dual challenge: it must continue to protect its normative identity as a promoter of democracy and human rights while addressing public frustrations rooted in inequality and exclusion. On one hand, the EU has codified values into binding treaties that reinforce its legitimacy; on the other, its economic and institutional practices often exacerbate socio-political divides. As a result, this contradiction places the EU in a precarious position where democratic legitimacy depends not only on institutional formality but also on its ability to reduce inequality, strengthen accountability, and restore citizen trust. Failing to resolve this tension risks further alienating citizens and reinforcing populist critiques of supranational governance. In effect, the EU's legitimacy hinges on reconciling the tension between technocratic efficiency and democratic responsiveness, a balance that remains elusive.

Climate policy negotiations have added a further layer to this legitimacy dilemma. Rosamond (2025) argues that these negotiations have historically weakened the democratic legitimacy of EU lawmaking processes by privileging technocratic and executive-led decision-making. Institutional mechanisms, such as intergovernmental bargaining and expert-driven agenda-setting, often marginalize parliamentary oversight and citizen input, thereby reinforcing perceptions of distance between EU elites and the public (Rosamond, 2025). Furthermore, the urgency of climate governance, while necessitating swift action, has led to executive dominance and narrowed the space for broader deliberation. For that reason, this finding contributes to debates on democratic legitimacy by highlighting how high-stakes policy domains exacerbate governance deficits, and it calls for a reevaluation of accountability mechanisms to safeguard legitimacy in EU climate governance (Rosamond, 2025). Therefore, this dynamic highlights how even progressive policy fields, such as climate action, can inadvertently reproduce the very legitimacy crises they aim to address when insulated from democratic participation.

ASEAN's democratic deficit, meanwhile, arises from its reliance on elite consensus and exclusion of civil society voices. Nevertheless, member states often avoid challenging one another, particularly on human rights abuses, in order to preserve cohesion. Consequently, this situation has created paralysis during crises such as Myanmar's military coup or the ongoing disputes between Thailand and Cambodia (Tempo.co, 2023; JPNN.com, 2025). While ASEAN frequently highlights its aspiration toward inclusivity, it continues to face accusations of irrelevance and ineffectiveness in protecting democratic space, revealing a gap between its rhetoric and practice.

Scholars and observers warn of a "democratic recession" in the region, where elite-led decision-making and authoritarian resurgence increasingly dominate the political landscape (Sindonews, 2020; Vietnam Law Magazine, 2025). Unless ASEAN strengthens civil society participation and develops firmer enforcement capacities, its credibility as a legitimate regional actor will remain fragile. However, without such reforms, ASEAN risks reinforcing an image of being resilient in form but hollow in substance, constrained by its consensus-driven diplomacy and weak institutional mechanisms.

A further dimension of democratic deficits lies in how both the EU and ASEAN have failed to respond adequately to pressing international crises, exposing the limits of their normative authority. In Europe, Puglierin (2024) argued that the EU has reached a turning point in foreign policy and security policy since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, the conflict has also prompted unprecedented unity and military readiness, despite enduring institutional challenges. Similarly, the EU tends to take a cautious stance regarding Israel's occupation of Palestine. In addition, Pace (2024) criticizes the European Union's approach to Israel's ongoing colonization of Palestine as inconsistent with its claimed role as a normative power, highlighting the EU's tendency to prioritize strategic interests over a serious commitment to realizing human rights and international law.

In the Southeast Asian case, Acharya (2021) argues that although ASEAN historically embodied traits of a nascent security community, this status is increasingly precarious due to internal discord and institutional stagnation. Nonetheless, ASEAN's inability to resolve the

Thai-Cambodian border crisis reflects the paralysis of its consensus-driven diplomacy, with member states prioritising sovereignty and bilateral negotiation over collective action (Haacke, 2021). Despite repeatedly declaring its support for Palestinian independence and the two-state solution (ASEAN, 2025), ASEAN lacks the political capability to translate this stance into tangible influence in the international arena. Hence, these failures demonstrate that both organizations struggle to bridge the gap between rhetorical commitments to justice and democracy and the geopolitical realities that constrain their actions.

Progressive Critiques and Alternative Regional Futures

Regionalism, far from being a neutral or fixed project, has become a site of contestation where competing visions of integration emerge. In Europe, critiques of the EU have not only been driven by right-wing populism but also by progressive and left-wing movements. In this case, political parties such as SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, La France Insoumise in France, and Die Linke in Germany have consistently challenged the EU's neoliberal orientation, particularly its austerity measures and weak democratic accountability (Bieler & Morton, 2001; Streeck, 2015; La France Insoumise, 2019; Die Linke, 2019). Furthermore, their critique highlights how integration has often reinforced market dominance at the expense of social protection, thus limiting the Union's democratic legitimacy. However, this critique suggests that the EU's legitimacy crisis is not merely institutional but also ideological, rooted in the imbalance between economic integration and social justice.

Despite these critiques, progressive actors have not abandoned the EU project. Instead, they demonstrate strategies of "reform from within," pressing for a vision of a "social Europe" grounded in solidarity, justice, and environmental sustainability. In this case, Lourenço (2022) documents how left parties in Southern Europe, particularly after the financial crisis, adopted hybrid strategies that combine radical social agendas with pragmatic adaptation to institutional constraints. Thus, the strategy demonstrates that integration can be redefined in more democratic and socially oriented terms, expanding the possibilities beyond neoliberal orthodoxy. As a result, such reformist strategies highlight that the EU remains a contested arena in which even marginalized actors can influence the trajectory of integration.

Nevertheless, these reformist efforts take place in a context where recurrent crises and exceptional politics have shaped EU governance. Unlike classical sovereign exception models, EU emergency politics are transnational and informal, with authority dispersed across both national and supranational institutions (White, 2019). Such emergencies have not been one-off episodes; instead, they have become routinized, leaving lasting imprints on institutions and decision-making norms. This dynamic entrenches executive dominance and accelerates technocratic rule, further eroding the scope for democratic deliberation (White, 2019). The normalization of emergency politics, therefore, reveals how crisis governance can gradually undermine the democratic foundations of regionalism.

The logic of necessity, embedded in emergency politics, has fueled populist movements that seek to reclaim sovereignty and restore popular agency. Nevertheless, White (2019) observes that the denial of agency within emergency frameworks has provided fertile ground for populist mobilization, particularly among those disillusioned with technocratic governance. Hence, this populist response is thus both a symptom of the EU's democratic deficit and a counter-reaction to the routinization of exceptional measures. As a result, it signals that governance by necessity risks hollowing out representative politics, leaving populism as one of the few channels of resistance. This dynamic demonstrates how institutional rigidity can paradoxically empower anti-systemic forces that capitalize on public discontent.

Against this backdrop, White (2019) identifies attempts at democratic resistance through "principled disobedience." Furthermore, parties such as SYRIZA in Greece and the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy embody this form of resistance, which challenges the logic of emergency by emphasizing revived partisanship and democratic contestation. By pushing back against technocratic constraints, such movements illustrate how contestation within the EU can generate alternative pathways for regionalism, even if their success remains uneven. Moreover, this perspective links back to progressive critiques that highlight the transformative

potential of grassroots demands for justice and accountability. In this sense, resistance movements play a dual role: exposing the limits of EU governance while simultaneously offering creative experiments in democratic renewal.

Taken together, progressive critiques of neoliberal integration and White's theorization of emergency politics suggest that regionalism is best understood as a contested political arena rather than a fixed institutional order. For ASEAN, the lesson lies not in replicating EU institutions but in recognizing the importance of plural critiques and grassroots demands. While ASEAN's sovereignty-first model restricts formal enforcement of rights, civil society and grassroots actors are increasingly pressing for more accountable governance. For this reason, by drawing inspiration from both progressive reformist agendas and democratic resistance strategies, ASEAN can move beyond elite-driven stability toward a more people-centered regionalism that integrates justice, accountability, and social inclusion. Such a reorientation would not only strengthen ASEAN's legitimacy but also address the region's pressing socio-political inequalities (Bieler & Morton, 2001; Streeck, 2015; La France Insoumise, 2019; Die Linke, 2019; Lourenço, 2022; White, 2019). Ultimately, the comparison highlights that the future of ASEAN hinges on its ability to treat regionalism as a dynamic, evolving project responsive to societal needs.

Regionalism in a Multipolar and Contested World

Regionalism today unfolds within a shifting multipolar global order where legitimacy and authority are increasingly contested. In this situation, both the EU and ASEAN face challenges not only from material constraints but also from the symbolic dimensions of global politics. Furthermore, Badie (2019, 2025) highlights that humiliation, recognition, and cultural memory shape international legitimacy as much as military or economic power. Hence, this insight reframes regionalism as a struggle over meaning and identity, where institutions must continually adapt to remain relevant in a contested international landscape.

For the EU, the multipolar context requires balancing its liberal-democratic identity with the realities of great power politics, including relations with Russia and the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry (Jopp & Pollak, 2024). Nevertheless, the failure to achieve this balance risks eroding the EU's normative credibility and reinforcing populist critiques of supranational governance. Recent studies emphasize that, while the EU has adopted more solidaristic mechanisms than during the euro crisis, concerns about democratic accountability persist. Therefore, Fasone and Lupo (2024) note that executive dominance and complex procedures weaken parliamentary scrutiny, raising questions about whether these instruments can be consolidated in ordinary times and accompanied by stronger checks and balances.

ASEAN, meanwhile, faces even sharper legitimacy tests under conditions of multipolarity. Moreover, its model of consensus and non-interference risks irrelevance as regional crises multiply, from Myanmar's ongoing repression to cross-border disputes. Additionally, Tempo.co (2025) and Vietnam Law Magazine (2025) underscore that without institutional reform, ASEAN's ability to deliver stability and justice will remain limited. Thus, this situation resonates with Badie's (2025) argument that governance in a contested order must increasingly incorporate plural voices beyond state elites, including grassroots actors, diasporas, and civil society organizations. For this reason, the ability of ASEAN to transform symbolic declarations into meaningful reforms will determine its relevance in the decades to come.

Nonetheless, the fragility of ASEAN's democratic legitimacy is compounded by the rise of illiberal forces within member states. Furthermore, Bünte (2023) examines how uncivil society groups in Thailand and Myanmar have emerged as key actors in processes of democratic erosion. However, these organizations, often linked to conservative elites, mobilize against democratization during times of perceived or manufactured crises. By presenting themselves as defenders of national order, they strategically exploit fear and instability to derail democratic reforms. Therefore, such developments show that legitimacy challenges for ASEAN are not only regional but also embedded in domestic political arenas.

Crucially, Bünte (2023) demonstrates that uncivil society often operates in tandem with former regime elites, advancing agendas that erode liberal norms and weaken social trust.

Consequently, these actors undermine civility and exacerbate class, ethnic, or religious cleavages, producing long-term consequences that extend beyond immediate political crises. Moreover, the persistence of such movements illustrates how authoritarian resilience can be reinforced from below, making democratic consolidation more elusive in Southeast Asia. For ASEAN, this complicates regional legitimacy, as its sovereignty-first design prevents decisive action against illiberal domestic actors while simultaneously limiting the scope for grassroots participation.

This dynamic also highlights an essential divergence between the EU and ASEAN. While the EU struggles with technocratic governance and accountability gaps (Fasone & Lupo, 2024), ASEAN faces the corrosive impact of illiberal mobilizations within member states (Bünte, 2023). However, both cases demonstrate that regional legitimacy cannot be reduced to formal institutions alone but must account for the interaction between transnational structures, domestic elites, and societal actors. In both contexts, the challenge is how to preserve democratic credibility under conditions of multipolarity while responding to crises that amplify populist or illiberal pressures.

Taken together, these insights suggest that the future of regionalism lies in its ability to adapt to contested symbolic politics while safeguarding democratic accountability. In addition, Badie (2019, 2025) emphasizes humiliation, recognition, and cultural memory, underscoring that legitimacy cannot be sustained solely by economic or military strength. For the EU, this means consolidating solidaristic crisis instruments while reducing executive dominance and reinforcing parliamentary oversight (Fasone & Lupo, 2024). For ASEAN, it requires confronting both its sovereignty-first constraints and the destabilizing role of uncivil society in the erosion of democracy (Bünte, 2023). Ultimately, the resilience of regionalism in a multipolar world will depend on its ability to integrate diverse voices, resist authoritarian influence, and rebuild trust in democratic governance.

Table 1: Table of Comparison of EU and ASEAN

Dimension	European Union (EU)	Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
Historical Foundations	Founded after WWII to prevent future conflicts; grounded in Enlightenment ideals, social movements, and human rights traditions	Born from anti-colonial struggles and Cold War rivalry; emphasizes sovereignty, stability, and non-interference
Normative Orientation	"Normative Power Europe" - promotes democracy, human rights, and rule of law as binding obligations (Copenhagen Criteria, Lisbon Treaty)	Sovereignty-first model - justice and democracy are aspirational, not binding; the "ASEAN Way" prioritizes consensus
Institutional Design	Strong supranational institutions with legal enforcement (European Parliament, Court of Justice)	Weak enforcement bodies (e.g., AICHR) limited to recommendations; consensus decision-making dominates

Democratic Deficits	Democratic deficit manifested in distance between elites and publics, amplified by Brexit, populism, and technocratic governance	Democratic deficit rooted in elite consensus, exclusion of civil society, and weak accountability during crises (e.g., Myanmar coup, Rohingya crisis)
Crisis Response	Mixed: shows unity in security/foreign policy (Ukraine war) but inconsistent in migration, austerity, and Palestine issues	Paralysis in crises due to non-interference; limited influence beyond declarations (Myanmar, border disputes, Palestine)
Progressive Critiques	Criticized as neoliberal and technocratic; challenged by left-wing movements (SYRIZA, Podemos, Die Linke, LFI) demanding "Social Europe"	Criticized for irrelevance and ineffectiveness; civil society pushes for people-centred governance but constrained by state sovereignty
Legitimacy Challenges	Fragile legitimacy due to populism, inequality, and executive dominance in crisis governance	Fragile legitimacy due to authoritarian resilience, illiberal mobilizations, and institutional stagnation
Future Prospects	Must balance liberal-democratic identity with geopolitical realities; deepen accountability and reduce inequality	Must reform sovereignty-first model, empower civil society, and evolve toward people-centred governance

Comparative Insights and Implications for the Future of Regionalism

Overall, the findings provide several comparative insights. The European Union (EU) demonstrates that it is possible to embed justice and democracy within regional institutions, yet its experience also reveals how fragile these commitments can become under the pressures of populism and neoliberalism. ASEAN, by contrast, illustrates the endurance of a sovereignty-first approach to regionalism but also exposes the risks of democratic stagnation and elite dominance. Both regions therefore face democratic deficits: in Europe, this gap exists between supranational elites and increasingly disillusioned publics, while in Southeast Asia it lies between consensus-driven elites and marginalized grassroots actors. These deficits indicate that institutional structures alone cannot secure legitimacy without addressing deeper socio-economic inequalities and imbalances of power.

More broadly, regionalism should not be viewed as a static or neutral project but as a contested political space shaped by competing narratives, priorities, and identities. Reforming regional institutions demands sustained political will, inclusive participation, and responsiveness to global challenges. For the EU, this entails strengthening accountability and reducing inequality. For ASEAN, it requires moving beyond rhetorical commitments toward genuinely people-centred governance. The future of regionalism in both contexts depends on their capacity to integrate justice and democracy into institutional frameworks while adapting to the complexities of a multipolar and contested world. Ultimately, the resilience of regionalism will rest on how effectively it embraces pluralism and amplifies the voices of its people.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that regionalism should not be seen as a stable institutional arrangement but as a dynamic and contested political arena, where competing visions of justice, democracy, and legitimacy constantly interact. The European Union illustrates both the transformative potential and inherent vulnerability of normative regionalism: while it embeds democratic and justice-oriented values within its treaties, persistent democratic deficits and the rise of populist politics continue to erode its legitimacy from within. ASEAN, in contrast, sustains regional stability through its sovereignty-first model but does so at the cost of democratic depth, constrained by elite dominance and the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms. These comparative insights make clear that neither region can sustain legitimacy without addressing the structural imbalance between institutions and the societies they claim to represent. The durability of regionalism, therefore, depends on a decisive shift toward inclusive, accountable, and justice-oriented governance that prioritizes citizens over elites. In an increasingly multipolar world, the strength of any regional project will rest on its capacity to reconcile unity with diversity, and institutional order with democratic responsiveness.

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