



PRAKSIS
THE JOURNAL OF ASIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

ISSN: 2815-1046

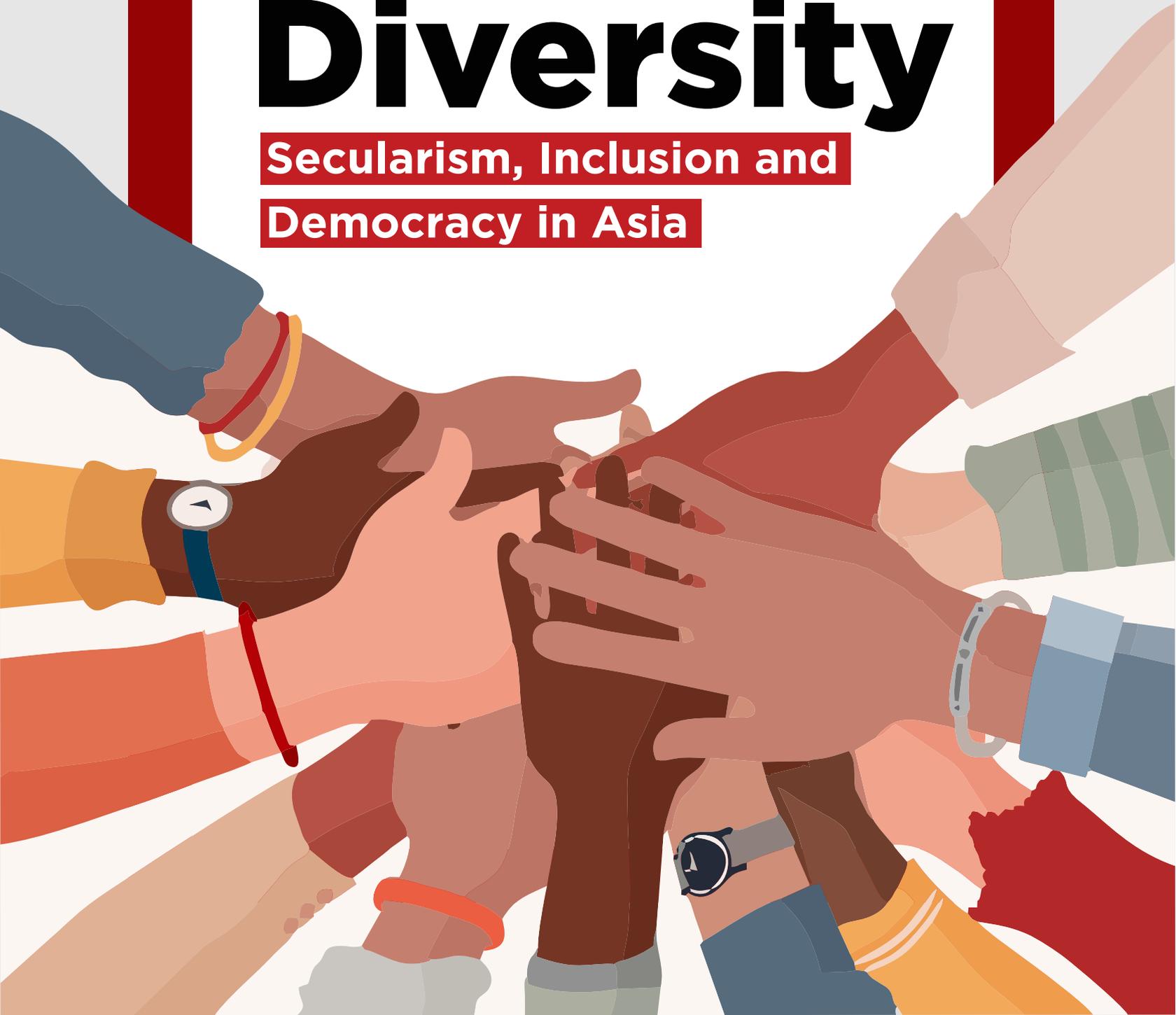
Volume 2

Issue 1

August 2022

Unity in Diversity

Secularism, Inclusion and
Democracy in Asia





PRAKSIS is a semiannual publication of the Network of Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia). It seeks to combine theory and practice by providing cogent analyses to inform the strategy of the progressive movement and help shape the policy direction that should guide the region's governments.

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Two Tales of Identity Politics in Thailand

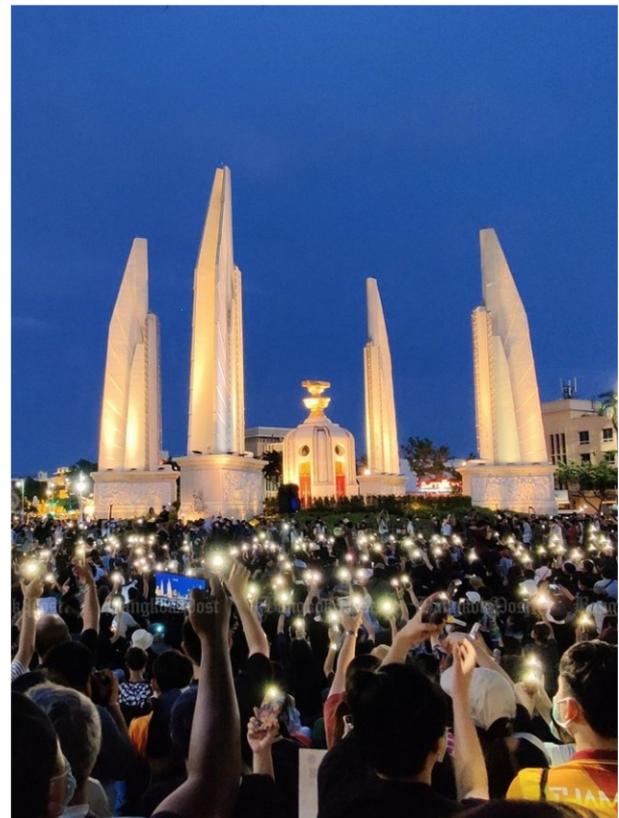
Ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual, and other identity-based movements are sweeping the globe, dividing, and deepening the split between peoples and, in some cases, diverting into violent conflicts. Thailand is no exception to the rise of new forms of identity politics and the complications of democracy and identity. In this paper, I explore two fora of identity politics: the Muslim forum in the three southern provinces, which is constantly enflamed by oppressive violence, and the LGBTQIA+ movement's push for same-sex marriage legislation, which is linked to the youth movements. Since its proponents seek to advance their own unique particular interests or concerns, identity politics is strongly related to exclusivist groups. Furthermore, identity politics will replace the public's quest of shared goods and economic prosperity, according to critics, who claim that boosting identity politics will cause social disintegration (Fukuyama 2018). However, I contend that identity political formations are not necessarily independent of social and economic conditions. When employed properly, identity-based movements can enable marginalized groups to engage in traditional politics more effectively and accomplish diversified democratic decision-making as a result of negotiation of multiple interests.

What is Identity Politics, And How Does It Work?

Typically, identity political formations seek to protect the political independence of a certain group that has been sidelined in its larger context.

“Identity political formations seek to protect the political independence of a certain group that has been sidelined in its larger context.”

Image: www.bangkokpost.com



With the objective of greater self-determination, members of the groups advocate or reclaim methods of interpreting their difference that challenge mainstream characterizations. Both conservatives and progressives in Thailand are using identity-based movements as a weapon. The former argues that a nation requires a unifying ingredient to govern itself, whereas the latter feels that identity politics is necessary because it demands acknowledgement for those who have previously been refused representation.

Muslim Identity

The Melayu Muslims of Thailand's deep south have a distinct identity, and one of the primary causes of the region's ongoing fighting is their historical obscurity and repression of their identity. The need of paying more attention to religious cleavages and religious militarization in Thai political and electoral contention is emphasized in this section.

In the Deep South, the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala practice an ethnicized, Malay-speaking Islam. In Thailand, they are a minority, yet they are the majority in the southernmost region. These southern Muslims account for around 44 percent of Thailand's total Muslim population (between five and seven million). During Pridi Phanomyong's administration, the first "Chularajmontri" was established in 1945 under the Islamic Patronage Act, with the main purpose of assisting in the integration process of the southern Malay Muslim region into the Thai country (Yusuf 1998). Despite this, an anti-colonial battle against Buddhist-majority Thailand flared in the 1960s, and religious and political frictions remain, with the risk of unrest erupting at any time. Since the insurgency raid on the military camp in Narathiwat province on 4 January 2004, Thailand's three southern provinces have been the country's most violent and conflict-ridden area (Deep South Incident Database).

Following the coup in 2014, the military tightened its hold on authority in the Deep South by transferring control of the semi-independent Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC) to the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). The resounding rejection (more than 60 percent) of the junta-sponsored constitution by the Muslim majority in the restive Deep South on 7 August 2016, marked them out from the other southern provinces, indicating a sense of resentment among the Muslim population, which has arisen from enduring economic disparities and injustice they have suffered at the hands of the authorities. It expressed people's views on the military regime's



Image: www.ucanews.com

“The Melayu Muslims of Thailand's Deep South have a distinct identity, and one of the primary causes of the region's ongoing fighting is their historical obscurity and repression of their identity.

legitimacy and disapproval to the draft charter as dangers to the region's distinctive ethno-religious character.

In the 2019 elections landscape, the majority of Muslims in the deep South voted for the newly formed Prachachat Party, led by Wan Muhamad Noor Matha (Wan Nor) the leader of “Wadah” faction which campaigned on the national pluralist platform and fielded Muslim candidates in most electoral constituencies in the South. In the three southernmost provinces, the Prachachat Party won six out of eleven seats. Furthermore, the very low COVID-19 immunization rates in the three provinces are also notable, indicating mistrust of the central Thai government, which administers the vaccines.

In fact, the deep mutual mistrust and internal divides on both sides are evident and a primary cause in postponing a peace dialogue. With its intolerance for political decentralization, the Royal Thai Army continues to control regional policies, leaving little possibility for social or political reform. Bangkok officials also show little interest in granting more de jure local control to the southern provinces, undermining the declared goals of elected pro-peace and pro-autonomy Muslim leaders.

Power Structure, Mutual Distrust, and Cultural Perspective

Access to the identity representation power structure is considered as a tool to aid in the preservation of an individual's own identity. The solution to the conflict of identity politics and marginalization is to restore and build legitimate power for the people who live there by strengthening conflict resolution authority at the local, national, and international levels (Sattar and Sahoh (2021).

However, the circumstance have been contests between conservative royalist nationalist viewpoints and progressive localist and international ideas. From early 19th century until the present, Thai elites have been deeply concerned about the preservation of “Thainess.”

Thainess, in the eyes of the Thai state and allied academics, is perpetually threatened or in distress. It is something that officials must nurse back to health. As a result, the Thai government has put resources into preserving Thainess (Connors 2005), and any attempt to implement necessary laws to encompass minority identity can be seen as jeopardizing the essence of Thainess (Nuchpam and Prateppornnarong 2020).

Despite their anti-Thai state sentiments and cynicism of any militarist-royalist administration, LGBTQIA+ activists and Muslim advocates have little in common in their goals and operations following decades of human rights violations. The following is the story of Thailand's LGBTQIA+ drives.

LGBTQIA+ as a Form of Identity Politics

On the surface, Thailand appears to be a progressive country when it comes to LGBTQIA+ employees' rights. In practice, however, homosexuals and transgender people continue to endure systemic discrimination and stigma at work and in everyday life. Older sections of Thai society, conservative elements of the government, and religious organizations are all vehemently opposed. Those forces are currently wielding the government's levers, preventing any real reform in Thailand's laws regarding same-sex marriage.

“Homosexuals and transgender people continue to endure systemic discrimination and stigma at work and in everyday life.





Image: www.oneyoungworld.com

“Identity-based movements can be linked to a progressive alliance for political, social, and gender equality.

Activists continue their combat against social and structural barriers to equality, including the legalization of sex labor, abortion, and the modification of the law to allow marriage between people of all genders. Young feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists are speaking up in pro-democracy movements, asserting that their demands for society to recognize minorities' rights are compatible with the battle for greater democracy in Thailand.

The Long and Uneasy Road of Same-Sex Marriage Law

The Sexual Diversity Network advocated same-sex marriage legislation for the first time in 2011. However, due to the coup d'état in 2014, progress was halted. Thai activists have started an online

petition to demand marital equality. They are lobbying for a bill to be introduced in parliament that guarantees marriage equality to all people, regardless of sexual orientation. The opposition Move Forward Party submitted a measure in 2020 to make same-sex marriage legal. In 2021, the government sent the Bill to the Constitutional Court for review. The Court ruled that marriages “only between women and men” would be regarded constitutional. LGBTQIA+ people are also described as a “different species” that needs to be segregated and examined since they are incapable of forming the delicate bonds of human relationships, according to the Constitutional Court's ruling. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community were outraged and disappointed by the verdict, which they claimed indicated that prejudice and bigotry influenced the judges' decisions.

The Civil Partnership Bill, which was modified with advice from experts in Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism and fine-tuned by the Council of State before it was approved by the cabinet in June 2022 (Thai PBS). The bill will be debated in the House later, in concurrence with the Move Forward party's Marriage Equality Bill, which goes a step farther in legalizing same-sex marriages and granting equal rights (*Bangkok Post* 2022).

Conclusion: Thailand's Identity Politics and Democracy

Thailand's democracy is under siege. We have seen democratic institutions decline, fair elections deteriorate, and the rule of law come under attack during the last ten years. Despite the fact that identity politics is on the rise in Thailand, it has not yet led to the development of “others vs “us” and divide societies into ever smaller groups that are becoming increasingly hostile to one another.

The question is whether collective identity can provide sufficient social and political cohesion. Thailand is in desperate need of a working paradigm of democratic political identity. Violence, prejudice, discrimination, and unfairness can all be minimized if individuals can create political negotiating room to encourage full representation of minority groups. Identity-based movements can be linked to a progressive alliance for political, social, and gender equality. Conditions favorable to minorities' economic and social advancement may become more readily available if this occurs.

Muslim minority protections and LGBTQIA+ community rights are unlikely to survive without democracy, and democracy is unsustainable without appropriate consideration of identity concerns. ■

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