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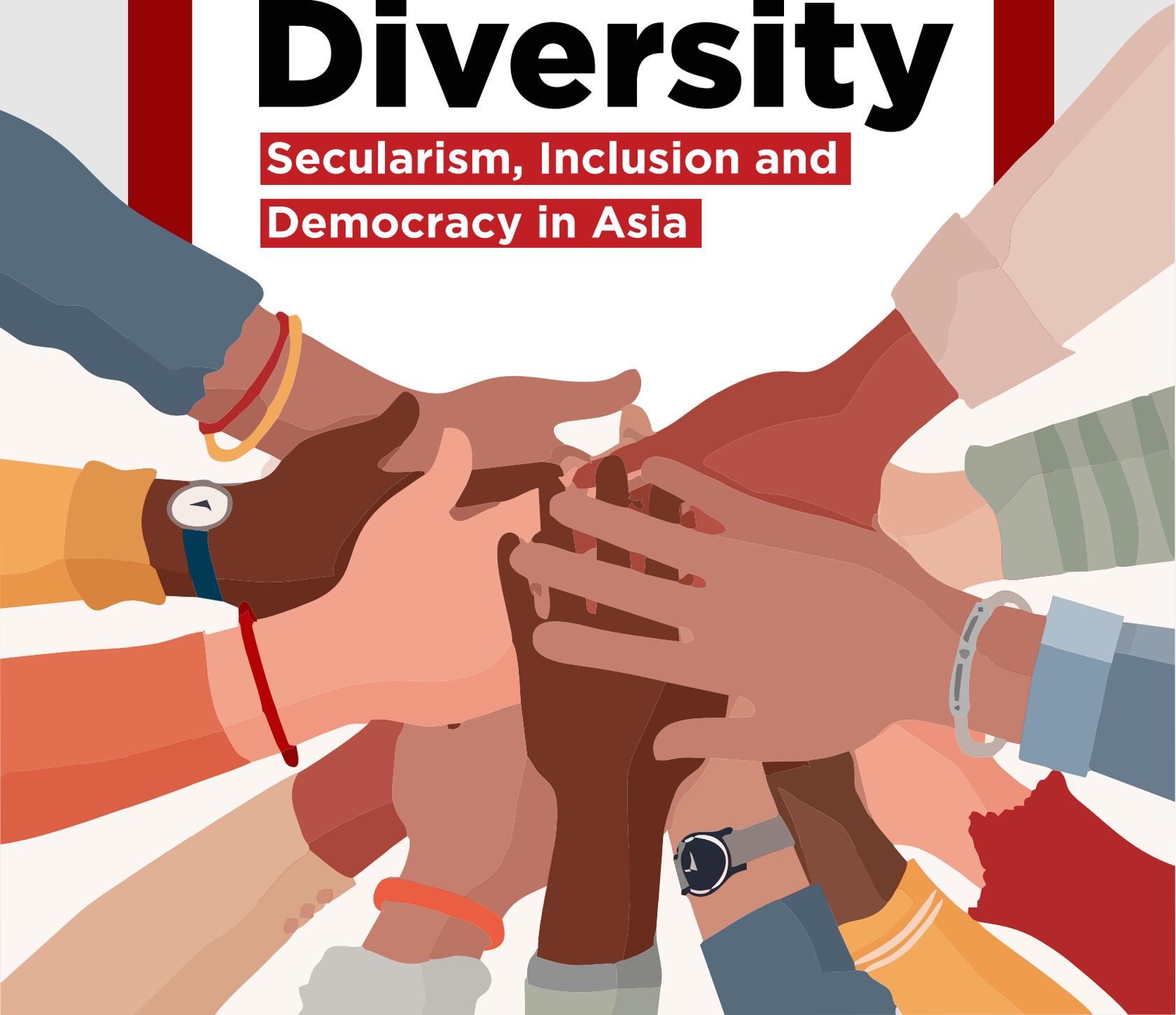
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Unity in Diversity

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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Unity in Diversity

In August 2017, American far right groups staged a massive demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia. Meant to unite the various white nationalist groups in the United States, the rally sparked violent clashes in various parts of the city which left three people dead. Among the casualties was Heather Heyer who died when a white supremacist deliberately drove his car into a crowd of mostly peaceful counter-protesters. The event in Charlottesville demonstrated the growing influence of the far right — emboldened, no doubt, by Donald Trump's presidential victory a year earlier.

Unfortunately, similar trends are also occurring in Western Europe, where far right parties stoke racism and Islamophobia to gain public support. In the recent French presidential election, for example, far right candidate Marine Le Pen narrowly lost to incumbent Emmanuel Macron with a 17 percent difference. While in neighboring Germany, the anti-immigration Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) won 83 seats in the Bundestag, promising in its 2021 manifesto to end “the creeping extinction of European cultures” through the “complete closure of external EU borders.”

Described by Enzo Traverso as an attempt “to destroy democracy,” the rise of the far right also underscores the increasing importance of identity politics in the early twenty-first century. Meant as a form of collective action, identity politics seek to articulate the needs and demands that arise from the shared experiences of certain social groups.

But in the hands of the far right identity politics turns into a 'politics of resentment.' For as Francis Fukuyama points out, their aim is not to simply defend supposedly aggrieved whites, but to redefine society along “narrow ethnic terms that exclude big parts of the population.”

By hoping to shut off the West from further immigration, the far right can, therefore, be understood as a reaction to globalization and to the multicultural world that it is creating. Defined as the increasing integration of national economies through trade and direct foreign investments, globalization is not only facilitating the free flow of goods. It is also engendering profound demographic changes as migrants move to the West to either study or work. This, however, is causing considerable anxiety among whites — fearful that growing religious and ethnic diversity also means the loss of their long-established sources of identity.

In contrast, diversity has long been a hallmark of the Asian region. Not only is it the birthplace of the world's five major religions, but Asia also has hundreds of ethnic groups scattered across 48 countries and in 11 different time zones. And despite their obvious differences, most ethnic and religious groups have lived in harmony with one another, thereby enriching the arts, traditions, and culture of the region.

Nepal, for example, only has a total land area of 147,000 square kilometers, but it boasts of 92 ethnolinguistic groups living within its borders. And while the Han may be the dominant people in China, they also share the country with 55 ethnic minority groups.

This respect for diversity has been pivotal in the struggle for universal human rights, as various ethnic and religious groups fought together to achieve independence during the first half the previous century. Such united effort was again witnessed in the 1980s and 90s, as people took to the streets to overthrow dictatorships and initiate the process of democratization.

In recent years, however, various conservative and populist parties have come to power by weaponizing identity, thereby dividing their societies along sectarian and communal lines. We see this dynamic occurring in India, where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) threatens, not only to the country's cultural and religious minorities, but also to the secular order that was put in place by the country's founders.

Malaysia, on the other hand, has a long-established policy of affirmative action to improve the material conditions of the country's *bumiputra* or ethnic Malays. Unfortunately, the policy also had the effect of splitting the country's diverse population along racial lines. This has been further weaponized by parties such as UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) to further fracture Malaysian voters along religious and racial divides.

Meanwhile, Indonesia has long been characterized by its ethnic and religious pluralism since previous elections have largely been insulated from identity-based conflicts. The country, however, has seen a steady rise in divisive rhetoric, especially after 2016 when Islamist groups launched a massive campaign to remove Jakarta's Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok), who they accused of blasphemy for insulting the Qur'an.

As a set of principles, social democracy both has points of convergence and differences with identity politics. While recognizing the concerns of specific societal groups, social democracy's ultimate aim is to extend human rights on a universal scale—regardless of gender, religion or ethnicity. It cannot, however, succeed in its attempt unless it has a complete understanding of identity politics and its impact on the ongoing dynamics in the Asian region. For this reason, this issue of PRAKSIS gather articles from noted thinkers and

activists to examine this question and help develop a proper social democratic response.

We begin with an article from Natalino Ornai Guterres, a young leader of FRETILIN, who describes “Timorese society (as) a generally accepting one,” with its religious tolerance, high representation of women, and vibrant LGBTQ+ community. However, Timor-Leste is still a young nation “that is in the process of constructing and defining its own identity.” This can occasionally place minority groups in a situation of vulnerability since “race and ethnicity remain sensitive topics.” Guterres, therefore, encourages his fellow social democrats to “challenge fake information” and call out leaders “when they promote hate speech.”

“We must uphold the respect for diversity and promote inclusiveness,” he adds. “Only then can we liberate our people from poverty and inequality.”

A similar dynamic is also occurring in neighboring Indonesia which, as Lucia Ratih Kusumadewi observes, has been thrown “into the vortex of identity politics.” Known for its pluralist roots, the country's identity is now being redefined in religious terms, due to the rise of Islamism and “the strengthening of conservatism.” Politicians, Kusumadewi notes, are also aggravating the situation, since they see religion as a “powerful instrument for achieving and/or maintaining political power.” But politicized Islam, she asserts, is contrary to the Pancasila, which was developed by Indonesia's founding fathers “as the common political objective of the new nation-state.”

Because of her country's current predicament, Kusumadewi emphasizes the importance of multiculturalism which “values cultural diversity as a feature of a modern democratic society.” She also calls on her fellow progressives to undertake “multicultural education that encourages concrete encounters with other cultures and by valuing mutual respect and toleration.”

Unfortunately, Indonesia is not the only nation where religion is being politicized. In India, for instance, the BJP is actively undermining the country's secular constitution so that they can establish a Hindu state. Though their ultimate goal is yet to be achieved, Ruchira Chaturvedi believes that the ruling party has nonetheless succeeded in transforming the state since “it is no longer a neutral arbitrator of India's constituent units.” Instead, the delivery of public goods and services is now “contingent on ideological and political conformity.” Chaturvedi even asserts that India is now being ruled by an “unspoken dictatorship” as the various institutions of the state are being used to suppress “religious and ideological minorities.”



Image: www.csmonitor.com

Because of its “reactionary communal platform,” Prerna Singh (in a separate article) classifies the BJP as a rightwing party, which blames non-Hindus “for all the problems of society.” And unlike conventional conservative parties that “are defenders of the status quo,” the BJP, on the other hand, uses “mass politics and launch mass movements with a strong critique of the existing society.” This has led to bitter social polarization and “growing animosity towards minority groups.” Singh also cites “instances of lynching, violence and intolerance” that also threaten “India's pluralist democracy.”

The rise of Hindu nationalism is also exerting influence on India's neighbors. In his essay, Kamal Dev Bhattarai points out that the “BJP, through its various front organizations, is pushing the agenda of a Hindu state in Nepal.” It does so by “building party-to-party relations with political parties in Nepal” and by taking advantage of the “close political, cultural and civilizational affinities between the two countries.”

The increasing influence of the BJP coincides with the growth of pro-Hindu forces within Nepal. These include the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (which calls for the restoration of the monarchy) and the Bibeksheel Sajha Party (which is

demanding a referendum on secularism). Though Nepal is not yet polarized along religious lines, Bhattarai warns that “the Hindu agenda is likely to become more prominent in the days to come.”

Apart from religion, race can also be a basis of identity politics. This is the case in Malaysia — a tri-racial country composed of ethnic Chinese, Indians and Malays. Though it is “a melting pot of cultures, beliefs, civilizations and religions,” Kasthuri Patto asserts that Malaysia is “plagued by political instability” due to its “race-based politics.” This is even enshrined in the Constitution with bumiputras being granted special privileges that are not provided to all citizens. The architect of this type of politics has been Barisan Nasional, which ruled the country for more than six decades. Patto, in fact, quotes former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin who declared in 2010 that he is “Malay first and Malaysian second.”

Unfortunately, race continues to influence Malaysia's domestic politics. When Pakatan Harapan won the 2018 general elections, for example, the new government tried to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). But it elicited fierce resistance from conservative Malay groups who were afraid of losing their privileges.

In a related essay, Jannie Lasimbang examines the situation of Malaysia's indigenous peoples called *Orang Asal*. Though they are considered as bumiputra (along with Malays), Lasimbang maintains that “the *Orang Asal* have obviously not benefited from the constitutional provision for bumiputera status.” They have, in fact, suffered from “decades of neglect” since “there is no specific recognition for the *Orang Asal* as a group.”

Unfortunately, the ruling parties of Sabah and Sarawak have successfully kept the *Orang Asal* in check by coopting their elders and traditional leaders. Conferred with various titles and appointed to village development councils, indigenous leaders are then integrated into a system where they serve as conduits of political patronage.

To win over the *Orang Asal*, Lasimbang encourages progressives to champion the issues of indigenous peoples, particularly land rights and rural development. She also suggests “learn(ing) from the indigenous people's concept of consensus-building” while, at the same time, “countering parochial sentiments.”

Though Lasimbang sees patronage as a political tool for maintaining the status quo and keeping an entire people obeisant, others also view it as an instrument that can be used to actively shape national identity. This is clearly the case in the recent restoration of the Marcos dynasty in the Philippines, with the election of the dictator's son and namesake to the presidency, along with his vice presidential running mate, Sara Duterte, daughter of now former President Rodrigo Duterte.

In his article, Carlo Angelo Vargas, points out that the Marcos-Duterte alliance succeeded in “forging the broadest unity of political dynasties and traditional political interests from the national down to the local level.” Further aided by their “machinery of disinformation,” the Marcos-Duterte tandem won with the largest electoral margin since 1986, promising to provide voters with immediate material rewards in exchange for political support.

But patronage politics, Vargas insists, has a long-term corroding effect, since it conditions Filipinos to believe that they are mere “passive witnesses to the unfolding of the country's history, rather than as empowered citizens.” It also undermines citizenship, which is built on “respecting the innate rights of individuals.” To defeat the Marcos-Duterte clique, Vargas proposes “empowering Filipinos to see themselves as citizens rather than as recipients of patronage” and help them “see themselves as part of a broader Filipino 'family' of equals that is inclusive of everyone.”

While most of our contributors share a negative view of identity politics, Sripan Nogsau Sawasdee sees the issue differently, asserting that it has its own liberating aspect. Though she concedes that “identity politics is tied closely to exclusivist movements” that promote “special interests or concerns,” she also argues that “identity-based movements, when used effectively, can help marginalized groups participate more fully in conventional politics.” To prove her assertion, Sawasdee looks at two forms of identity politics in Thailand: the LGBTQIA+ movement's campaign for same-sex marriage, as well as the condition of Melayu Muslims in the country's Deep South.

For decades, Muslim communities have been neglected by the central government, due to its obsession with “Thainess.” Their plight even became worse under the present junta, which has shown “little interest in granting more de jure local control in the southern provinces.” This has generated considerable resentment among Muslims, and as a result, “Thailand's three southern provinces have been the country's most violent and conflict-ridden area.” On the other hand, the campaign for marriage equality already began in 2011, but further progress was halted three years later with the 2014 military coup. A bill was later submitted to Parliament by the Move Forward Party in two years ago. But the country's Constitutional Court ruled that the bill was unconstitutional since marriage is “only between women and men.” While these two communities still face considerable challenges, Sawasdee believes that they can be linked to a larger “progressive alliance for political, social, and gender equality.”

This grand “coalescence of struggles and identities” was seen in the Philippines, according to Veronica Alporha, when various identity-based groups banded together to support the presidential bid of opposition leader Leni Robredo. Though their combined effort was not enough to prevent a Marcos presidency, they nonetheless succeeded in reigniting hope through their unprecedented mammoth rallies from February to May 2022. These organizing initiatives, Alporha argues, became possible because of the “availability of organic space that allowed for the expression of identities and struggles.” She also insists that if that kind of solidarity is sustained, then it can create “a new kind of politics that values inclusivity, equality, and diversity.”

This issue of PRAKSIS provides various perspectives on identity politics. But all our authors agree that in today's globalized world, the prime objective of social democracy is to pull in the socially excluded and extend to them rights that are all universal and indivisible. ■

By: Natalino Ornai Guterres

Affirming the Role of Social Democrats

Challenging the Negative Politicization of Identities in Timorese Politics

Timorese society is generally an accepting one, or it seem so on the surface. The country is highly commended for its religious tolerance, its high representation of women in parliament, and its emerging annual LGBTIQ+ Pride March.

When former Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo made a statement in support of the LGBTIQ+ community to mark the country's first ever Pride March in 2017, he was labeled “a breath of hope in a region of surging discrimination.” Since then, several national leaders have publicly shown support for the LGBTIQ+ community; and representatives of political groups, like FRETILIN Youth, even joined the 2018 Pride March.

However, despite the positive image that the country is trying to portray, identity topics such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, race and ethnicity remain sensitive topics and can trigger hateful sentiments when politicized. This is evident in the hateful attacks we usually see every five years during election campaigns.

Timorese National Identity

The Timorese people are generally proud of their country's recent history and their struggle for independence.

Culturally, while many still hold on to strong Melanesian tribal values, there is also a heavy Portuguese influence.

“Despite the positive image that the country is trying to portray, identity topics such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, race and ethnicity remain sensitive topics and can trigger hateful sentiments when politicized.

Image: www.outinperth.com



The Catholic Church also played a crucial role in the country's struggle for independence and in the process of building Timorese identity. In fact, Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion in the country today with more than 97 percent of the people identifying themselves as Catholic, followed by almost two percent Protestant and less than one percent Muslim.

Despite the above-mentioned characteristics, Timor-Leste is still a young and vibrant nation that is in the process of constructing and defining its own identity, and this can put minority groups in a situation of vulnerability to discrimination as various groups, including the majority, try to reclaim their place in the country.

Political rivalries, dominated by male heroes and former leaders of the independence movement known locally as the *Maun Bo'ot* or Elder Brothers, are often filled with speeches about who can better represent the “true Timorese identity” and build a stronger nation.

Current Political Climate

The country's political arena has been mainly dominated by two of its biggest political parties: FRETILIN (The Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste) — which started the movement for Timor-Leste's independence in 1974 — co-led by one of its founders Mari Alkatiri who is also considered a founder of the nation, and CNRT (National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction) — founded in 2007 and led by its founder Xanana Gusmão — also regarded as a national hero. In addition, there are other smaller parties playing the bargaining card, jumping from one side to another.

Most, if not all Timorese political parties, claim to be of the center-left with a political ideology of social democracy, which values social equality. This is translated into national support for initiatives that protect and affirm equal opportunity and a constitution that upholds the principles of equality and human dignity, although we have yet to see anti-discrimination legislation for vulnerable groups and other related policies.

In 2015, there were efforts to reconcile the two biggest parties so that they can work together in developing the country, given that neither of them had won a majority of the votes in recent elections. However, the differences between the two parties have made it difficult for them to work together. One of their main differences is their opinion on how to best use the country's petroleum fund. While FRETILIN's goal is to strengthen the system to help tackle corruption and end government's



Image:www.iwda.org.au

“The constitution upholds the principles of equality and human dignity, although we have yet to see anti-discrimination legislation for vulnerable groups.

reckless spending on large infrastructure projects (which many argue have contributed to the rise in inequality), CNRT's main mission, on the other hand, is to reach its ambitious target of completing its large infrastructure projects on time and contribute to poverty alleviation as set out in its Strategic Development Plan for the country.

Politicization of Identities

Despite their shared social democratic principles, their ambition to rule often make militants of the two biggest parties use hate speech to attack each other, politicizing certain identities for their own interest — especially those of minority groups — and putting marginalized groups at risks of hateful attacks.

During the 2018 election campaign, when an influential political figure called another influential political figure “terrorist” on stage, allegedly implying the latter's religious background, it sparked hateful exchanges on social media against the minority Muslim community. Images of people

in burka on a Dili street were posted on Facebook by fake social media accounts calling for people not to vote for FRETILIN “to avoid terrorists flooding the country.” These posts were backed by anti-Muslim comments from real accounts that also shared their fear of terrorist attacks. The whole episode happened merely a few days after a series of suicide bombings hit three churches in Surabaya, Indonesia.

In fact, this was not the first and the last time that people's identities were politicized, especially those of minority groups.

In 2005, when the First Constitutional Government, led by former Prime Minister and FRETILIN's Secretary General Mari Alkatiri, proposed a legislative action that would require schools not to make religion a mandatory learning subject (which is a normal practice in most secular states), he was accused of being anti-Catholic and trying to promote his Muslim culture in a Catholic majority country. We would often hear anti-Muslim slurs from his detractors and over the years, similar religious and ethnic-based comments have been made against him.

When he was still Prime Minister, Alkatiri had actually initiated negotiations with the Vatican to finalize a concordat, but this was not picked up by the succeeding governments after he was forced to step down in 2006. Ten years later, under the leadership of Rui Maria de Araújo, Timor-Leste and the Holy See finally signed a concordat, in which it also reinforced the principle of non-mandatory religion classes at schools. However, as of today, religion is still a mandatory subject.

Most recently, during the 2022 presidential campaign, one of the most popular candidates, José Ramos-Horta, was attacked for briefly mentioning about the need to create a more inclusive society for all, including LGBTIQ+ people, during a live debate on television. His comments stirred a heated debate on social media where he was said to be “promoting same-sex marriage and destroying society's moral fabric and the sanctity of marriage” in a Catholic majority country. Racist attacks have also been made against the CNRT-backed candidate for being a *mestiço* and not a “pure Timorese,” the same way FRETILIN's Mari Alkatiri has always been attacked for being of Middle Eastern descendant.

“In its effort to reinforce and popularize its stand for social equality, FRETILIN issued a resolution condemning any discriminatory action and appealing to all its members to avoid the use of actions and languages that are discriminatory and offensive against others.

Image: www.sbs.com.au





Image: www.gaystarnews.com

“We must uphold the respect for diversity, bring positive visibility for marginalized groups, and promote inclusiveness.

Discriminatory and offensive comments are, unfortunately, normalized and camouflaged as jokes. During the latest election campaign, in its effort to reinforce and popularize its stand for social equality, FRETILIN issued a resolution approved by its National Political Council condemning any discriminatory action and appealing to all its members to avoid and not allow the use of actions and words that are discriminatory and offensive against others.

But the biggest politicization of identity was perhaps the one that led to the political turmoil and crisis in 2006, the East vs. West narrative, which tore the country into two and led to the forced resignation of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

The Role of Social Democrats

These events have taught us that although the Timorese people may seem to live together harmoniously in spite of their differences, political manipulation can easily lead to outbreaks of hateful attacks, proving the country's vulnerability and the people's conservatism and lack of knowledge and understanding on diversity and human rights. And those who suffer most tend to be minority groups.

In a country where education is still a huge problem, political manipulators are successful in rallying some groups by speaking to their fears and playing with their emotions. And when manipulated groups feel threatened, they retreat to tribalism.

As progressives and as social democrats, our role is to point out when our identity is being used and when our emotion is being exploited to benefit particularistic interests. It is our role to recognize that someone is playing us.

We must challenge fake information and help educate ourselves and others on issues we do not understand.

For those of us who are actively involved in a political party, we must call out, not only the leaders of the opposing parties, but also our own leaders when they promote hate speech.

We must uphold the respect for diversity, bring positive visibility for marginalized groups, and promote inclusiveness, not only in our campaigns but also in our policies.

Currently, FRETILIN, honoring its party constitution as a social democratic political party, has been making efforts towards progressive political training, especially for its youth members, with the objective of passing on the principles of social equality. Those efforts, although still in their initial stages, are already showing good results and giving hope that in the long-term, greater positive changes can be achieved. But given the fact that we are still immersed in a strong patriarchal society, the struggle still exists, and more efforts are required to be able to achieve the goal of equality.

We must hold on to the same values we held when we liberated our country from oppression — unity in diversity. Only then can we liberate our people from poverty and inequality. ■

By: Lucia Ratih Kusumadewi

In the Vortex of Identity Politics

The Decline of Democracy in Post-Reformation Indonesia

Even before independence, identity has been a significant issue in Indonesian society. The construction and meaning of being “Indonesian” have shifted from time to time, under the influence of various structural factors, both internally and externally. The history of Indonesia thereby leads this nation into the vortex of identity politics, where identity is sold by political actors as a commodity to gain power and economic resources. How has identity been defined and used for political purposes? Does this situation endanger democracy and social integration in Indonesia? What can progressives do to face the issue of identity? This article will answer these three questions.

Identity as Politics

In Indonesia today, discussions regarding identity often lead to the question of religious identity. This is not to deny the significance of other identities such as race, ethnicity or gender, especially since Indonesia is known to be a pluralist society. However, for the political elites, religious identity seems to be the most interesting form of identity. It has, in fact, become a very useful instrument for achieving and/or maintaining political power. Its importance is not only in the political sphere, but in the larger social body as well. At present, religious identity is the dominant factor in the construction of meaning, compared to other identities such as race, ethnicity or gender.

“Religious identity is the dominant factor in the construction of meaning, compared to other identities such as race, ethnicity or gender.

Image: www.eastasiaforum.org



As a background, we can revisit the pre-independence era of this nation's history. John Sydenham Furnivall in his book *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (2010), described the Dutch East Indies as an example of a *plural society* — a society where two or more elements live side by side without one united political purpose. During that time, identities organized along racial, ethnic and religious lines intersected with political and class domination. Europeans were at the top of the social structure and ruled over the rest. Meanwhile, native peoples (who were perceived to be the poorest and completely dominated) were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. At the middle were the 'eastern strangers' (people of Chinese descent) who lived through trading and sought proximity to the rulers.

Unfortunately, the legacy of this *plural society* still haunts Indonesia from time to time. Ever since independence, the political elites who were called as the nation's 'founding fathers' formulated the "Pancasila" ideology as the common political objective of the new nation-state. However, "Pancasila" has hardly been diffused into the larger political sphere. Legitimate governments have occasionally been disturbed by political forces that aim to reconstruct the notion of Indonesia. Indonesian nationalism has also been questioned with the strengthening of identity groups, that has often led to ethnocentrism and fundamentalism.

After eliminating Islamic-based movements followed by the bloody anti-communist purge of 1965 (Cribb 2002), political turbulence was temporarily neutralized by Suharto's iron-fisted regime. The jargon of political stability for economic development became a legitimizing tool for various human rights violations. The authoritarian New Order regime silenced any anti-government movement, including Islamic-based movements. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936)¹ inspired, not only the colonial government, but also the New Order regime, in eliminating 'political Islam' while giving space to 'religious Islam' (Benda, 1983).

The Reformation Period of 1998 created an ambiguous situation for Indonesia. On one hand, it was a moment of victory for democracy. On the other hand, the euphoria of freedom gave way to tensions and rage which eventually boomeranged, killing democracy. Various bloody conflicts among ethno-religious groups occurred from mid-1996 to 2005, which showed the vulnerability of

nationalism and social integration to politico-economic crisis (Bertrand 2003; Kusumadewi 2012). Meanwhile, along with the rise of the transnational Islamic movement, Islamism in Indonesia emerged as a new power that is challenging the nation's political objective and social order. Apart from Islamism's long-term objective of turning the country into an Islamic state, Indonesia has also become a target of terrorism and radicalism.

The Rise of Islamism and the Challenge to Democracy

In the two decades after reformation, Islamization has changed the face of Indonesian society, largely characterized by the strengthening of conservatism (Bruinessen 2013), fundamentalism and sectarianism (Ricklefs 2012), and Islamic commodification (Fealy 2008). Robert Hefner also cites the emergence of a 'religionization' process with the disappearance of what he calls 'non-standard Islam' (2014) or what Clifford Geertz defined as '*abangan*' in his book *The Religion of Java* (1996). In this case, '*santri*' or students from Islamic schools are giving new meaning to Islam, which identify piety as the overriding character of a moralistic person. It seems that more and more Muslims in Indonesia are refusing to be considered "non-pious." Piety is not only demonstrated by obedience to religious rituals but also in the use of conservative symbols such as the hijab, halal food, etc.

The strengthening of conservative Islamic identity has given birth to a new phenomenon which Vedi Hadiz (2014) calls as "new Islamic populism." This new populism is understood as an unequal alliance among classes that is united by a narrative based on the notion of a similar fate. In populism, the dominant elites use gap issues such as injustice and religious morality to generate greater support, overcome various internal differences and defeat their political opponents. Islamic populism was visible during the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections when presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto attacked Joko Widodo using identity issues. New Islamic populism was also visible during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, when populist elites organized a massive demonstration called "Action to Defend Islam" (*Aksi Bela Islam*) to oust Basuki Tjahaja Purnama — the incumbent governor whose Christian-Chinese origin was considered as an insult to Islam.

¹Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje was a Dutch scholar who served as an adviser on native affairs for the Dutch East Indies colonial government — *the editor*.



Image: www.thejakartapost.com

“The strengthening of conservative Islamic identity has given birth to a new phenomenon called new Islamic populism.

At the same time, at the level of society, relations among various groups are becoming conflictual. The Center for Islamic and Social Studies (PPIM) of the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta (2022) and the Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (2022) both reported that the number of citizens who are intolerant and close to radicalism have been increasing. Cases of intolerance, discrimination and even persecution happened to minority groups as reported by The Wahid Institute (2020) and Setara Institute (2020). Examples include restrictions on the construction of churches, the obligatory use of hijab, as well as the persecution of Ahmadiyya, Shia and other minority groups. Recently, Ade Armando, a scholar who is openly critical of Islamic groups, was attacked and stripped by protesters in Jakarta for allegedly insulting religion.

Regardless of the lurking threat of social disintegration, we need to see the performance of the Joko Widodo government in the last nine years. The first half of Joko Widodo's administration focused on infrastructure and economic development. However, until now, much work has yet to be done, especially in addressing issues involving human rights violations, intolerance and protection of minority groups. In the second half of his presidency, which only has two more years left, these agenda have not yet been resolved. The focus still revolves around pandemic response, opening up to foreign investments, and completing massive infrastructures projects, which includes moving the state capital to East Kalimantan. Therefore, some critics consider Joko Widodo's government as neoliberal.

Beside its neoliberal character, Joko Widodo's administration is also marked by its strong oligarchic character, wherein political elites 'unite' to gain and secure their own power. This is reflected in the absence of any strong political opposition. Even Prabowo Subianto, who was Joko Widodo's opponent in the 2014 and 2019 elections, was eventually appointed as Minister of Defense. The government's oligarchic character is also reflected in its repressive handling of critics² and opposition groups, such as the 212 Movement, the 2019 protest actions against the curtailment of powers³ of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the 2020 student demonstrations against the draft Omnibus Law, and more recently, student demonstrations opposing proposals to extend Joko Widodo's presidency to three terms.

²The 212 Movement or the Jakarta 2016 protest was a mass protest led by Islamic groups demanding the ouster of Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok — *the editor*.

³The protests were triggered by a proposal from the Lower House requiring the KPK to first get their approval before the latter can initiate any surveillance, arrest, or confiscation of property — *the editor*.

⁴Supporters of the Omnibus Law claim that it will promote investments. Opponents, on the other hand, assert that it will dismantle safeguards for workers' welfare and environmental protection — *the editor*.



Image: www.en.shafaqna.com

“Indonesian democracy is facing simultaneous challenges from two powerful forces — illiberal Islamic groups on one hand, and the united oligarchy embedded in state institutions on the other.

Given this situation, progressive activists are pessimistic about the future of Indonesian democracy. Scholars even describe the era as a setback for democratization and the comeback of 'illiberal democracy,' wherein leaders are elected through legitimate elections, but the freedoms that citizens have are extremely limited. At the moment, Indonesian democracy is facing simultaneous challenges from two powerful forces — illiberal Islamic groups on one hand, and the united oligarchy embedded in state institutions on the other.

Restoring Democracy Through Multiculturalism

Democratic deepening in Indonesia is not an easy endeavor but it must be undertaken. This process can begin by reviewing the basic political purpose of this nation. There is nothing wrong in continuously reviewing and discussing the nation's basic political purpose in order to improve our vision for the future. The expression “Pancasila without compromise” (*Pancasila harga mati*) is a new form of authoritarianism that tends to halt the

process of social transformation. Scholars, for example, often discuss whether Indonesia can be classified as a secular state or a religion-based state. This confusion stems from the first principle of Pancasila: “Belief in the Almighty God” (*Ke-Tuhanan yang Maha Esa*), which generates various interpretations. If not properly handled, Pancasila's first principle can become an empty space that can be used to legitimize any interest, including those of sectarians and powerful oligarchs who want to benefit from identity politics.

The simple but significant question has been expressed by French sociologist Alain Touraine (1997): “Can we live together, equal and different?” (*Pourrons-nous vivre ensemble égaux et différent?*). This question is important to remind people that living together requires the spirit of diversity, justice and equality; and that a democratic way of life is essential in modern society. Regarding Indonesia, there is an urgent need to reconstruct both the political system and the state to address further democratic backsliding. In this case, multiculturalism, in my opinion, can be a prospective solution.

In political philosophy, multiculturalism is understood as an alternative that offers a governance of 'living together,' and values cultural diversity as a feature of a modern democratic society. Multicultural politics is a political path for societies that are culturally diverse (Parekh, 2002; Kymlicka, 2003). Compared to religion-based politics that is often ethnocentric and authoritarian and to a secular state that is 'blind to differences,' multicultural politics bridges people by addressing the weaknesses of the existing political system. A basic principle of multicultural politics is the recognition and protection of the rights of all cultural groups. By doing so, it is able to advance democracy, justice and universal humanity.

To achieve these goals, progressives must focus on the following points: (1) Multicultural politics can only be realized if the majority (read: dominant) group willingly give up their privileges and share their power. (2) An activist movement is needed to heighten public awareness on multiculturalism. (3) Multicultural consciousness can grow through multicultural education that encourages concrete encounters with other cultures and by valuing mutual respect and toleration. Multicultural education should be understood as a movement for social change. (4) Political and economic structures should be built to support this movement. ■

“Multicultural politics is a political path for societies that are culturally diverse.



Image: www.newmandala.org

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By: Ruchira Chaturvedi

Diversity vs. Uniformity

The Challenge Before India

India is a land of diversities. There are multiple languages, cultures, religions, castes, creeds, cuisines, costumes, etc. Every few hundred kilometers, one will experience a different custom, a different dialect, a different cuisine, a different tradition. A popular Indian saying captures this diversity: '*Kos-kos par badle paani, chaar kos par vaani*' (Just like the taste of water changes every few kilometers, so does the language). And so, there are many strands of Indian identity, all of which have coexisted and flourished together. In that sense, India is a *thali*, which is a dish consisting of a large plate with lots of different bowls containing different dishes (Tharoor 2012). Each bowl has a distinct dish but is ultimately part of the same dish and belongs together on the same plate.

Recognizing India's vast diversities, the country's founders consciously designed both the Constitution and the state to be a neutral arbitrator between India's constituent units — whether religious, caste, regional or ideological. To deepen this democratic engagement with society, the Indian state was stratified at the union, state and local body levels. This is to ensure that India's diversities could engage and actively participate in deciding how the governing institutions of the state could best meet their needs and aspirations. In this imagining, decentralized governance is not just a tool of inclusive governance but also a

mechanism to ensure the equitable distribution of power over access to resources and opportunities between various communities.

It is this carefully designed system that has broken down, because of the imposition of one leader, one ideology and one culture (including, but not limited to the imposition of one language, one religion, etc.). Apart from the fact that this imposition negates the civilizational imagining of India as a plural, cosmopolitan and liberal society, this imposition has fundamentally altered the role of the state. It is no longer a neutral arbitrator between India's constituent units, and it no longer extends goods and services to *all* citizens. Its engagement, delivery of public goods and services, and the application of the rule of law is increasingly contingent on ideological and political conformity. Just to cite two examples, while comedians, activists, academics have been arrested under draconian laws for jokes they did not crack or thoughts they did not even articulate, mob lynchers and inciters of hate and violence have been let off without any penalties simply because they are affiliated with the ruling dispensation.

This is not an isolated case. There are tens of thousands of such cases across the length and breadth of India. No longer do people trust the state to uphold the rule of law or function in a constitutional manner.



Image: www.news18.com

“The state is no longer a neutral arbitrator between India's constituent units, and it no longer extends goods and services to *all* citizens.

This has sparked fissiparous tendencies and millions of Indians have erupted in sustained protests on various issues. For example, faced with the threat of being disenfranchised by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), Muslims across India protested for months on end. Similarly, faced with three controversial farm laws that threatened to destroy their livelihoods, farmers erupted in protests for over a year. Likewise, students across India have been involved in multiple protests to resist draconian laws imposed on them because of their ideological orientation and which deprive them of scholarships, hostels and future opportunities. Furthermore, constitutional guarantees as well as statutory rights and protections for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs)

have been methodically undermined. Various demands have been raised by members of the ruling dispensation to remove or review caste-based reservations, that were supposedly meant to undo the “graded inequalities” of the past (Press Trust of India 2019).

Similarly, the state refused to stand by a judicial challenge for a law meant to safeguard Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (STs) against atrocities and even slashed the budget for the welfare of SCs and STs by over 50 percent (Raju and Deshpande). Muslims and SCs are also being constantly targeted in the name of 'cow protection' and their livelihoods are under attack. The state has also misused investigative agencies to harass political and ideological opponents.



Image: www.trtworld.com

“Non-state actors have lynched, raped, murdered and even rioted against Muslims, Scheduled Castes, women and ideological minorities.

Apart from actively using the law and government apparatuses to suppress India's constituent units, the state has also ignored the spate of violence unleashed by non-state actors. Widely acknowledged to be affiliated with the ruling dispensation, non-state actors have lynched, raped, murdered and even rioted against Muslims, SCs, women and ideological minorities. In each of these incidents, the state didn't just ignore these crimes (Press Trust of India 2019; see also Mashal et al. 2022) but valorized the perpetrators as heroes (*The Times of India* 2018; see also *The Wire* 2016). By doing so, the ruling dispensation has methodically circumscribed and undermined every institution meant to hold it accountable, whether it is the Parliament, the judiciary, the media, the information commissions, and even the opposition parties.

It has been argued that the indirect effect of all these is the undermining of the state's sovereignty, which no longer holds a monopoly on violence — i.e., a Weberian state (Deshpande 2017). This is a phenomenon that is understudied, but it is extremely dangerous for India's social contract

that the state has partially outsourced its monopoly on violence. It could be argued that this outsourcing is a deliberate attempt to accord primacy to the ruling dispensation's ideological affiliates (the Sangh Parivar) over social and cultural matters. This will have grave consequences for India.

Much like during the freedom struggle, the governing institutions of the state (the political executive, the police, the judiciary, the media, the investigative agencies, etc.) are being pitted against India's diversities, especially religious and ideological minorities. This has already been characterized as an unspoken dictatorship. The question is, how can progressive forces alter the status quo given that the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against them?

First of all, any hegemonic force can only be defeated through guerrilla tactics. In fructifying this, India's diversity is its biggest strength. Every caste, creed, and ideological minority in different regions is uniquely placed to challenge and destabilize the homogenizing blitzkrieg that we face. The electoral victories of Congress Party (Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan), *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Tamil Nadu), Trinamool Congress (West Bengal), as well as the victories of the farmers and anti-CAA and NRC protestors demonstrate that taking on the behemoth normatively and in a hyper-localized manner yields dividends. To do this, progressives will have to forge alliances with each other, create a meta-ideological narrative that is premised on India's civilizational ethos of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the World is one family) and proffer an inspiring alternative vision. They need to acknowledge that their greatest strength lies in their diversity. What they, therefore, need to do is strategically leverage their unique perspectives and approaches to become more than the sum of their individual parts. India's history is rife with examples where the same approach has been used to unseat dictatorial conquerors.

What progressives, especially in the political parties, civil society and the media, must urgently do is to pass the baton to those who have the fire in them to disrupt the status quo and are sufficiently well equipped to counter the tactics, techniques and stratagems of the ruling dispensation. It is no longer business as usual, since the norms and protocols that shaped politics before 2014 no longer exists. It is a whole new world, and it requires a whole new set of stakeholders. This is especially pertinent given 65 percent of India's population is below 28 years of age (while the average age of a Parliamentarian in India is 57 years old).

In the national interest, progressives will have to bite the bullet. ■

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By: Prerna Singh

Identity Politics in the Indian Context

India, being a vast country and divided into different states, is diverse in terms of religion, caste, race and ethnicity. It is home to various ethnic and religious groups. Across the world, India is viewed as a captivating country where people of different religions live together in harmony. The Indian population is an astounding blend of various races and cultures. Besides the numerous castes, there are eight “major” religions, as well as 15-odd languages spoken in various dialects and with a considerable number of tribes and sects. This diversity of caste and religion is believed to be the defining characteristic of Indian society.

But these distinctions have also played a crucial role in institutionalizing socio-political power. It has resulted in various kinds of segregations, subjections, suppressions and subversions. Almost all parties use identity politics to gain power. However, India's ruling party, which is definitely rightwing, is known for its reactionary communal platform. In that sense, it is different from ordinary conservative parties of the right. Classic rightwing parties openly advocate for the interests of the ruling classes and are defenders of the status quo. This stance differentiates them from other major parties that strive, in varying degrees, to build a broad coalition of support for the welfare state and other social democratic prescriptions.

“India's ruling party, which is definitely rightwing, is known for its reactionary communal platform. In that sense, it is different from ordinary conservative parties of the right.

Image: www.deccanherald.com



Social Structuring

In contrast to conservative rightwing parties, there is also the phenomenon of neo-rightwing parties which are marked by radicalism — i.e., they use mass politics and launch mass movements with a strong critique of the existing society which break the boundaries of the traditional right. The mass politics generated by such parties is primarily motivated by a reactionary-sectarian platform which targets an “enemy” — other ethnic or religious groups that are held responsible for all the problems of society.

Diversity is natural. No two things in nature are equal in all respect. So do human beings. People vary in color, complexion, condition and capacity. However, these natural differences should not be the basis of the structure of any society. The kind of inequality derived from natural differences has been a major issue of contention in how to structure human society. Not surprisingly, the ideas of justice and equality have been at the center of debates regarding the proper structuring of society.

Polarization

The current polarization in India revolves around this fundamental question: Should India be a secular country or a Hindu nation, since roughly 80 percent of the population are Hindus?

The main opposition party, which was in power for nearly seven decades, claims to be secular and pluralist. However, recent divisions in the political leadership — coupled with India's economic transformation, changes in the media setting, as well as increased use of the internet and social media — has culminated in polarization. This became increasingly evident following the landslide electoral victories of the current ruling party in 2014 and 2019.

The consequences of polarization have grown ever more alarming. Attacks on India's independent political institutions have increased; opposition parties have become extremely watchful in defending pluralism and secularism; and there is growing animosity towards minority groups. The majoritarianism and polarization in India is more damaging today than it has been in the past.

Instances of lynching, violence and intolerance towards differences in opinion is seriously threatening liberal freedoms and India's pluralist democracy. And along with religious-based polarization, caste mobilization has also become an important factor in Indian politics.



Image: www.cfr.org

“Attacks on India's independent political institutions have increased, and there is growing animosity towards minority groups.

There are politicians who want to divide people based on caste and religion. But it is important to point out that there are also people who have divided themselves in that manner; and they want those divisions to continue. Political parties only take advantage of the situation. The ruling party has tapped into the emotions of people and their inclination towards majoritarianism. They have designed their political strategy based on this approach.

Identity Politics

Identity politics is a political approach wherein people of a particular religion, race, class, gender, social background or other identifying factors, develop political agendas that are based upon these identities.



Image: www.analyticsindiamag.com

“The role of women is essential in politics and cannot be ignored by progressives.

Casteism and religious differences are more prominent in rural India. For that reason, they are part of the most important 'wants' of the rural majority. Urban India is not free from these, either. But the priority of most people in the cities is development. The catch here is the voting divide between rural and urban India. There can be many reasons for this divide, but the results are still the same.

This rural-urban divide shows two sets of people with different wants, and the divide is growing. WhatsApp groups, for example, are flooded with forwarded messages that invoke hatred against a particular group or community.

Given this situation, it is important to undertake caste-based surveys to better understand the concerns of the majority and articulate their demands. It would also help in candidate selection and in increasing the chances of winning.

Women in Politics

The question of diversity and identity politics will not be complete if gender is not discussed.

Gender politics in India was not very prominent in the past. However, it is now gaining importance and is being used by political parties to woo female voters. India has had powerful female leaders, with some ascending to top political posts, such as President and Prime Minister. However, studies show that the political participation of women is still low. Traditionally, politics is seen as a male bastion, and women are discouraged from entering it on the pretext that it is not a 'feminine' profession.

It's not just societal bias against women that poses an obstacle for female politicians. Previously, to encourage the participation of women, the 50 percent reservation was introduced in local bodies. Unfortunately, most of the women who vied for these seats were relatives of politicians or from prominent political families. Unsurprisingly, most of them ended up being the rubberstamp of their male family members.

A bill to reserve a third of all seats in the national and state legislatures for women has been stalled in the Indian parliament for almost three decades. Intellectuals argue that affirmative action is needed, not only to encourage women's participation in law-making, but to also improve female representation in politics. A woman may initially get elected because she comes from a political family. But gradually, she will have to expose herself in the field and eventually, it will also encourage more women to enter this profession.

However, we simply cannot conclude that more women in politics will automatically lead to better policies for women, but it is also important to ensure equal participation to have a more inclusive society. Reactionary and conservative political forces are using religious, caste and communal identities to advance their political agenda. Gender doesn't seem to be their priority or preference. However, the role of women is essential in politics and cannot be ignored by progressives.

Women have suffered for ages. Therefore, there is an urgent need to raise their voice and ensure that they will have better representation in the country. ■

By: Kamal Dev Bhattarai

Nepal's Secularism Faces Challenges

Nepal achieved multi-party democracy in 1951, ending the 104-year-long Rana regime. There was no mention of religion in the new democratic constitution that was promulgated in 1959 after the years of political squabbling. No doubt, the majority of Nepali people have followed Hinduism since ancient times, but it was only in 1962 that King Mahendra declared the country as a Hindu state (Kainee 2016). According to the National Census 2011, 81.3 percent of the population identify themselves as Hindu, followed by Buddhism, which is at nine percent.

With the restoration of democracy in 1990, a new democratic constitution was introduced through an expert panel, thus setting the course for a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party democracy. This charter retained Nepal's status as a Hindu state, despite some protests from ethnic minority groups who wanted a secular state. Although prefigured from the 1950s onwards, serious and more mainstream demands for secularism emerged only in 1990 after the fall of the party-less Panchayat regime (Letizia 2017).¹

Between 1990 to 2007, the discussion on secularism was at the margins of national discourse. During this period, the monarchy took a

slew of measures for the promotion and preservation of Hinduism through different state institutions and various Hindu organizations. It was the erstwhile Nepali monarchy that established Hinduism as a state religion. This was done as the monarchs wanted to propagate the myth of their holy Hindu lineage, with the reigning monarch being no less than an avatar of Lord Vishnu, and as such, was above the law.

In 2005-2006, Nepal underwent a big political change. The Seven Party Alliance (SPA) — an alliance of mainstream political parties — and Maoist rebels, joined hands to overthrow the autocratic monarchy of King Gyanendra, which he established in February 2005 through a political coup. Bowing down to the demands of people, then King Gyanendra agreed to restore Parliament which was dissolved by democratically elected Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in 2001.

Secularism was not the prime agenda of the 2006 people's movement or by the Maoist rebels. But Nepal was abruptly declared a secular state in 2006 by the reinstated Parliament through a House proclamation. Such provision was adopted by the Interim Constitution in 2007 — a compromise document of the SPA and the Maoist party.

¹ The panchayat (assembly) is the oldest system of local governance in Nepal. In December 1990, King Mahendra dissolved the Parliament, and declared all political parties as illegal. He then created a new political system wherein the people can elect their representatives through the various panchayat which were organized at the village, town, district and national level. However, real power remained in the hands of King Mahendra who ruled in an authoritarian manner — *the editor*.



Image: www.trtworld.com

“It was the erstwhile Nepali monarchy that established Hinduism as a state religion. This was done as the monarchs wanted to propagate the myth of their holy Hindu lineage, with the reigning monarch being no less than an avatar of Lord Vishnu, and as such, was above the law.

Still, many raise questions about the opaque process that the Parliament had adopted to declare Nepal as a secular state since there were no adequate public consultations. Later, it was endorsed during the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly (CA) in 2008. From 2008 to 2015, there was not much public discourse on religion as the major parties remained committed to secularism. During the drafting process of the Constitution in 2015, the people's opinion was sought on this contentious issue. According to pro-Hindu forces, the CA did not publicize its report because majority of the respondents were in favor of having a Hindu state.

With the initiation of the voting process on each and every article of the draft constitution, the pro-monarchist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) led by Kamal Thapa registered a proposed amendment, urging the House to vote in favor of a Hindu state. But the CA overwhelmingly voted down the proposal to reaffirm Nepal's secular status. Of the 601 CA members, only 21 members voted in favor of the proposal, as the major parties stood against the revival of a Hindu state. This was a rare occasion when a Nepali parliament had voted on a religious matter.

In the final days of the drafting process, the issue of religion emerged as a bone of contention among the top leaders of the major parties, primarily among the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre. Eventually, the parties agreed on the issue of secularism, incorporating an explanatory provision assuring that secularism will not hurt Hinduism. Article 4 of the 2015 Constitution states: “Nepal is an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive, democratic, socialism-oriented, federal democratic republican State.” The explanation further says that “for the purposes of this Article, 'secular' means religious, cultural freedoms, including protection of religion and culture handed down from time immemorial.”

Hindu Sentiments Within the Major Parties are Rising

After the country adopted secularism in 2007, there was not so much visible dissatisfaction within the major parties. None of the parties used religion as a political tool to advance their objectives. But after a decade and a half, the situation is gradually changing as more and more leaders are leaning to the Hindu agenda.



Image: www.thediomat.com

“New political forces are embracing the Hindu agenda in order to advance their agenda, though Nepali society is not yet polarized along religious lines.

Now, there is a growing appetite for Hinduism inside the major political parties, particularly inside Nepali Congress — the grand-old democratic party. The key leadership of the major parties still adheres to the principle of secularism, but their gradual leaning to the Hindu agenda can be observed. In 2018, the Nepali Congress convened its Mahasamiti meeting, the party's second-most powerful decision-making body, where over 40 percent of the delegates petitioned the party leadership to amend the party's charter to stand in favor of a Hindu state.

Advocates of the cause within the party argue that people were not consulted or asked on it during the writing of the Constitution. Of the 1,600 party

delegates assembled in Kathmandu for the meeting, around 700 (over 43 percent) supported a signature campaign to press the party leadership to re-establish a Hindu state.

As prime minister from 2018 to 2021, CPN-UML Chair KP Sharma Oli took a series of measures to placate Hindu sentiments, including installing a golden *jalhari* at the Pashupatinath Temple.² In 2021, PM Oli worshiped the idols of Lord Rama and Sita at his official residence in Baluwatar before sending them to keep in Madi Ayodhyapur in Chitwan District. Through such initiatives, Prime Minister Oli was able to win the goodwill of the Hindu constituency.

New Pro-Hindu Forces are Emerging

With the passage of time, new political forces are embracing the Hindu agenda in order to advance their interest, though Nepali society is not yet polarized along religious lines. Some pro-Hindu political parties have already emerged since the country became a secular state in 2007. Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) is the only notable political force that is campaigning for the restoration of the monarchy and the Hindu state. Recently, there was a split in the party when its former president, Kamal Thapa, formed a new party called Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal whose ideological line is same to that of the mother party.

Over the past few years, some of the new political forces have tilted towards the Hindu agenda to gain political strength. Rabindra Mishra, a veteran journalist who now leads the Bibeksheel Sajha Party, has proposed dismantling Nepal's federal structures and holding a referendum on secularism. His proposal attracted fierce criticisms from advocates of secularism inside the party leading to a split.

The then Sajha Party had, through its national convention in 2020, unanimously passed a resolution demanding a referendum to decide the fate of secularism. At around the same time, Mishra, in his political document 'Changing Course: Nation above Notion', argued that in a country with 80 percent Hindus, the result of a referendum is a foregone conclusion in favor of the Hindu state.

As he asserts: “In the past one decade, scores of Hindu outfits have emerged in Kathmandu. In 2020, a series of protests took place across the country and in capital Kathmandu demanding the restoration of Hindu state” (2021).

²Pashupatinath Temple is a Hindu temple in Kathmandu dedicated to the god Pashupati, Nepal's national deity — *the editor*.

In his essay for the magazine *The Caravan*, Vishnu Sharma wrote, “While civil and political protests are a strong and regular feature of Nepali politics, these recent developments assume significance because of the coming together of various fringe groups on two broad demands: the restoration of the monarchy and the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra” (2021). But compared to the past, the numbers of participants in those protests are gradually increasing.

Recent public polls also show that the number of Hindu sympathizers is increasing. The survey conducted by Sharecast Initiative Nepal, a non-governmental organization, found that 51.7 percent of their respondents are in favor of declaring Nepal as a Hindu state. On the other hand, 40.3 percent said they are in favor of secularism, while 8.1 percent withheld their views.

According to the survey, the support for a Hindu state, at around 70 percent, is highest in Janakpur province (Subedi 2021). Pro-Hindu forces argue that secularism has become a fertile land for religious conversion, threatening the Hindu religion. But as Dipendra Jha argues, “if Hindu groups fear that Christians are forcing people to convert, they can follow the proper channels and ask the police to monitor and investigate such alleged instances” (2014).

“Or,” he further adds, “they can even pressure the Nepal government to bring forth an appropriate legal policy. Instead, these groups are issuing statements in favour of a Hindu state, which are aimed at weakening confidence and creating psychological terror among religious minorities. Secularism provides legal and psychological protection to religious minorities against majoritarian hegemony.”

External Influence

In 2014, India's Hindu-nationalist party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power with a thumping majority. Due to the close political, cultural and civilizational affinity between the two countries, political development in one country obviously affects the other. BJP, through its various frontal organizations, is pushing the agenda of a Hindu state in Nepal. More than that, BJP has adopted a policy of building party-to-party relations with the political parties in Nepal. Though BJP leaders are not advising Nepali leaders directly to establish a Hindu state, they do not mince words to say that Nepal should become one.



Image: www.vina.cc

“Though BJP leaders are not advising Nepali leaders directly to establish a Hindu state, they do not mince words to say that Nepal should become one.

On the other hand, Nepali leaders are keen to learn from BJP's success in winning elections. Prime Minister and Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba who was in India for an official visit in April 1-3 visited the party office of BJP.

Nepal-India relation expert Nihar. R. Nayak observes: “This was the first time a Nepali prime minister officially visited the party office of the ruling Indian party. It suggests a deep level of relationship as well as political maturity of the Nepali Congress and the BJP, both of which strongly believe in multiparty democracy, democratic values, norms, and constitutionalism” (2022).

Similarly, Prime Minister Deuba also visited India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh which is currently ruled by BJP leader Yogi Adityanath and offered puja there. Uttar Pradesh shares a border with Nepal and has close societal, cultural and religious connections.

As Nayak points out: “Uttar Pradesh has a special relationship with Nepal given its geographical contiguity, cultural linkages. Most Hindu Nepalis believe that taking a holy dip in the Ganges in Varanasi could help them achieve salvation. The only Nepal study center in India is located at Banaras Hindu University” (2022).

This is probably the first time Nepal's Prime Minister interacted only with the BJP, breaking the tradition of meeting with a wide range of politicians in New Delhi. Earlier in October 2021,

a team from Nepali Congress led by Prakash Sharan Mahat visited New Delhi at the invitation of BJP. Along with meeting BJP leaders, the NC delegation also visited Uttar Pradesh to meet with Adityanath, which reflects growing closeness between the two sides. In the meeting, Adityanath reportedly told the NC delegation to embrace cultural nationalism, a veiled reference to the Hindu agenda. The NC and BJP have agreed to expand their cooperation through exchanges and visits.

“Arguably, the Hindu agenda is likely to become more prominent in the days to come.

Image: www.freepressjournal.in



Over the past few years, BJP leaders are becoming more vocal in their demand to protect the Hindu religion and check rampant conversion in the rural areas. For the same purpose, BJP is building a network with Nepal's political parties. In fact, Adityanath, who has a strong emotional attachment with Nepal, is openly pushing for the revival of the Nepali Hindu state.

Writing for the online newspaper The Print, Sharat Pradhan and Atul Chandra observed: "That secularism is not his cup of tea has been expressed quite explicitly by Adityanath in his article penned under the headline, 'Antar-raashtreey saazishon ke jaal me phansta Himalayee Rashtra Nepal' ("The Himalayan state of Nepal has been caught in international conspiracies")...Describing 18 May 2006 as a 'Black Day', when the country's kangaroo parliament passed an 'unfortunate and unexpected' resolution declaring Nepal a secular state, Adityanath blames Maoists, Islamic militants, and Christians for the 'unconstitutional' decision" (2022).

BJP Spokesperson Vijay Sonkar Shastri, who was in Nepal in November, predicted that Nepal would sooner or later become a Hindu state (*People's Review* 2021). Speaking to media reporters in Pokhara, he said Nepal was a Hindu nation and it will remain so. BJP leaders are cautioning their Nepali counterparts to take measures to curtail religious conversions that are allegedly occurring under the new secular dispensation.

Conclusion

Though pro-Hindu voices are gaining ground, the chance of any changes in the current secular state is unlikely in the near future, as the major parties remain fully committed to the current Constitution. Though the Constitution allows a referendum on a matter of national importance, the road to one is not easy. Two-thirds of the members of Parliament need to back the proposal.

Article 275, which envisages referendums, declares: "If a decision is made by a two-thirds majority of the total number of the members of the federal Parliament that it is necessary to hold a referendum concerning any matter of national importance, the decision on that matter may be taken by way of referendum. Matters relating to the referendum and other relevant matters shall be as provided for in the federal law."

Additionally, there is not so much polarization of Nepali society in terms of religion. Still, some political parties want to advance their position through the Hindu agenda like what BJP is doing in India. And arguably, the Hindu agenda is likely to become more prominent in the days to come. ■

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By: Kasthuri Patto

Uniting the Nation

Addressing Malaysia's Race-Based Politics

Malaysia — a nation of rich resources, a melting pot of cultures, beliefs, civilizations and religions that was once pitted as the tiger of Asia — is now a nation plagued by political instability, sexism, racism, religious bigotry, radicalism, corruption, and abuse of power. In other words, social justice, cohesiveness, peace and harmony are on a downward spiral due to the deliberate actions of the government. And this alone is where the danger lies.

To understand the existence of race-based political parties in Malaysia, one must explore its history — from being a colony of the British called Malaya, to the Japanese Occupation, to the Communist insurgency, and finally independence on 31 August 1957, and subsequently the formation of the Federation of Malaysia on 6 September 1963 with Sabah and Sarawak. Having gained independence in 1957 from the hands of the British with Tunku Abdul Rahman as the country's first Prime Minister, the Federal Constitution was born — the supreme law of the land — and was ratified on 27 August 1957, four days before independence.

There is one particular article in the Federal Constitution that provides special privileges for Malays or *bumiputeras*, which are not accorded to all citizens. And this has been the root of Malaysia's identity politics, which has proven to be both a blessing and a curse.

“There is one particular article in the Federal Constitution that provides special privileges for Malays or *bumiputeras*, which are not accorded to all citizens. And this has been the root of Malaysia's identity politics.

Image: www.malaysiakini.com



Today the national census stands at 69.8 percent bumiputera, 22.4 percent Chinese, 6.8 percent Indians and one percent others. Indian laborers were brought in by the British from the 1700s to the 1800s to toil in rubber estates, tin mines and tea plantations. Some served as teachers, police officers and medical personnel. Others worked on railway tracks, making their way up to station master. But most ended up living in the most rural parts of peninsular Malaysia — and many still stay in these enclosures to this day. Chinese traders, on the other hand, made their way into the Malaysian economy through the spice trade, and through their involvement in tin mining and rubber production.

With the influx of Chinese and Indian laborers, there was a need to set up primary schools and other education facilities that gave importance on the mother tongue or native languages to promote and protect its use as markers of cultural and ethnic identity. Over the decades, hidden hands have shifted the goal post of identity politics, with unsurprising results — identity politics is triggering identity politics.

Malaysia's economy, politics and race relations suffered greatly during the darkest day of its history when racial riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May 1969. This further pushed the wedge, polarizing what was once a peaceful Malaysia. This then prompted the government to introduce five tenets known as the *Rukun Negara* (National Principles) in 1970, which supposedly embodies the spirit of the Federal Constitution. These five pillars — belief in God, loyalty to the King and country, supremacy of the Constitution, rule of law, and courtesy and morality — have been inscribed in almost every ministry and government agency, in every school, and on the back cover of every exercise book used by school students. However, over the decades, these principles (similar to the Indonesian *Pancasila*¹) have been reduced to mere decorative pieces placed on plaques and framed to adorn empty walls in public offices in compliance with government directives.

As a follow-up to the *Rukun Negara*, the government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 during the second prime ministership of Tun Abdul Razak, the father of former Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. The main objective of the NEP was to rebalance and recalibrate Malaysia's socioeconomic policies after the race riots of May 1969, which was a litmus test

to the system of administration as well as race relations in the country. The NEP strove to eradicate poverty, reconstitute both society and the economy, and achieve unity harmony and integrity.

Bumiputera Policy

Article 153 of the Federal Constitution guarantees “*Reservation of quotas in respect of services, permits, etc., for Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak*” 153. (1) *It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong² to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.*”

It is this provision which established the 30 percent equity ownership target for the *bumiputera*, supposedly to achieve a more balanced economy. But once a policy like this is introduced, overzealousness takes over and a siege mentality develops. And when racism is institutionalized, it would take more than a change in the law to bring Malaysia to the right track.

What started as a well-intentioned effort to ensure that no Malaysian is left behind resulted in a system riddled with double standards — not only between *bumiputeras* and non-*bumiputeras* but also among the ranks of *bumiputeras* themselves. And while it may be true that the big bulk of the socio-economic cake are owned by *bumiputeras*, they only comprise a small portion of the entire Malay or *bumiputera* population.

Political Parties

At the same time, these race-based socioeconomic policies cannot be realized unless you have certain bodies or vehicles that would carry them out. What better way to do it than through race-based political parties? Hence, Malaysia's further polarization has been perpetuated by identity politics in the form of race-based political parties.

An 'alphabet soup' of race-based and religious-based political parties had been formed since the time of British colonial rule up to the modern day. They are namely the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS or Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) and ethnic and tribal political parties in the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo. UMNO, PAS, MCA and MIC are

¹ The *Pancasila* (Five Principles) is the official ideology of the Indonesian state — *the editor*.

² The *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* is the official title of the Sultan of Malaysia — *the editor*.



Image: edition.cnn.com

“Malaysia's further polarization has been perpetuated by identity politics in the form of race-based political parties.

political parties that have strongholds in peninsular Malaysia, whereas parties like the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO) represent the Muslim Suluk-Bajau community. There are also other parties that do not identify themselves according to ethnicity or religion, such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP), *Parti Sosialis Malaysia* (PSM or Malaysian Socialist Party), *Parti Rakyat Malaysia* (Malaysian People's Party) and in the last 20 years, *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (KeADILan or People's Justice Party), *Parti Amanah Negara* (National Trust Party) and other smaller political parties.

Since independence in 1957 until 9 May 2018, the same Barisan Nasional (BN) government comprising of UMNO, MIC, MIC, Gerakan and other component parties had been in power for over 60 years and enjoyed a two-thirds majority in the Dewan Rakyat (Parliament), making it a walk

in the park to amend the Federal Constitution by virtue of votes.

In 2008, there was a great uprising, a Malaysian Spring, when opposition parties won five of the country's 13 states and finally broke BN's two-thirds majority in Parliament (which the latter has not regained up to this day). Prior to the elections, in November 2007, hundreds of thousands of Malaysian Indian men and women took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur to demand justice and the protection of their rights. This led to mass arrests, targeting prominent opposition figures and civil society leaders. Apprehended under the now defunct Internal Security Act (ISA), this meant that those arrested were detained without trial. This, in turn, triggered a massive protest wave against the government's heavy-handed handling of ordinary Malaysians who were only asking for what are rightfully theirs.



Image: www.vulcanpost.com

“Many Malaysians still feel the need for political representation based on race.

Two-Court System

While we pride ourselves for our cultural, religious and ethnic diversity, identity politics is still a tool that is being used and abused by all. Many Malaysians still feel the need for political representation based on race. Decades of fearmongering has led to the establishment of race-based parties that churn out race-based policies.

These policies are so ingrained in the system that even interpretations by the courts seem to vary. Because Malaysia has a two-court system — civil and Syariah — there are clear and separate matters that can and should be referred to either court. However, in a most recent case, hundreds of Malaysian mothers were not able to pass their citizenship to their children who were born overseas. On the other hand, Malaysian fathers are allowed to do so. This sort of discrimination, although not race-based, is still a form of discrimination.

Malaysia has seen its fair share of conflict between civil and Syariah courts, particularly in unilateral conversions to Islam by either the father or the mother without the knowledge and consent of the other. Because apostasy is considered as a crime, the entire reversal process is often shrouded by race and religious considerations instead of what should be done in the best interest of the child based on the country's civil laws.

Indira Gandhi is a Hindu woman was not aware that her husband Ridhuan Abdullah had become a Muslim convert and had their youngest daughter's religion changed to Islam without her knowledge or consent. The man then kidnapped their daughter, who was still a baby then, and has been on the loose for the past 14 years.

When he was asked why he refused to nab the rogue ex-husband, the former Inspector General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar answered that there were contradicting orders from the civil court and the Syariah court. This, coming from the top man responsible for law and order. Statements like this makes one shudder to think of the direction that the nation is taking.

It has been 14 years since Indira Gandhi had seen, cuddled or hugged her daughter, and yet there have been reports of Ridhuan Abdullah renewing his driving license and has apparently purchased a new car. Yet, no arrests were made.

Using the Race Card

In 2010, former Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin proclaimed in Parliament that he is “Malay first and Malaysian second.” He was Deputy Prime Minister at that time. When a leader can blatantly identify himself according to his ethnicity and only to assure his supporters that he is like them and vice-versa, the country is in deep trouble.

After Pakatan Harapan became the government (which broke UMNO's 60-year winning streak), one of the reforms on the agenda was the ratification of international treaties, particularly human rights conventions and chapters.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) should have been an easy enough convention for Malaysia to sign and ratify. Yet, it was met with rallies and threats of subsequent rallies. This was further worsened by academics who parroted the sentiments of both conservatives and radicals who opposed the ratification of the Convention. It was referred to the Council of Rulers, where the proposal died a natural death.

Hope for Malaysia

The country has moved regressively when it comes to unity, cohesion and respect. However, all is not lost. With strong and formidable partners in the form of the National Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM), the Malaysian Bar Council and civil society, the issue of identity politics is being given the limelight that it deserves — that it must be directly addressed with nation-building, peace and national unity in mind.

This would be Malaysia's 65th Independence Day celebration. And yet, the race card, paired with identity politics, always takes center stage. Efforts must be done to finally put this to an end. ■

“Identity politics must be directly addressed with nation-building, peace and national unity in mind.

Image: www.m.malaysiakini.com



By: Jannie Lasimbang

Orang Asal Lives Matter

Identity Politics in Sabah and Sarawak

Malaysia is a multi-racial country comprising of about 76 ethnic and sub-ethnic groups, with the Malays, Chinese and Indians forming the dominant group, and about 73 indigenous peoples or *Orang Asal* as they are collectively referred to. As of 2017, the Orang Asal of Malaysia who are residing mainly in Sabah and Sarawak, are estimated to account for around 13.8 percent of the 31,660,700 million national population.

According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), “The Orang Asli are the Indigenous Peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. The 18 Orang Asli subgroups within the Negrito (Semang), Senoi and Aboriginal-Malay groups account for 0.7% of the population of Peninsular Malaysia (31,950,000). In Sarawak, the 25 Indigenous ethnic groups are collectively known as natives (Dayak and/or Orang Ulu). They include the Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan, Kenyah, Lun Bawang, Penan, Kelabit, Kedayan, Bisaya, Berawan, Lahanan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Punan, Baketan, Ukit, Sihan, Tagal, Tabun, Saban, Lisum, and Longkiput. They constitute around 1,932,600 or 70.5% of Sarawak’s population of 2,707,600 people. In Sabah, the 39 different Indigenous ethnic groups are known as natives or *Anak Negeri*

and make up some 2,233,100 or 58.6% of Sabah’s population of 3,813,200. The main indigenous groups are the Dusun, Murut, Paitan and Bajau groups.”

Sabah and Sarawak, two Bornean territories, formed Malaysia in 1963 together with the Malay Peninsula, or Malaya. The demography and social history of Sabah and Sarawak vastly differ from the eleven states in the Malay Peninsula, and the stark inequalities between east and west Malaysia has led to increased state political nationalism over the past decade. At the heart of this increasing nationalism in Sabah and Sarawak is the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) — the legal instrument which led to the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. After more than fifty years, Sabahans and Sarawakians feel short-changed and that the guarantees contained in the MA63 have not been fulfilled and political parties are openly calling for a review of federal–state relations.

This article will focus on the conception of identity of the Orang Asal of Sabah and to some extent Sarawak, and how identity politics in these two regions have been used to shape the political landscape today.

Policies and Programs Neglecting *Orang Asal*

The conception of identity in Malaysia is very much centered on race, religion and sex and this is no different in Sabah and Sarawak. Any official document for school entrance and scholarships, aid applications from the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), and financial support for single mothers and the disabled invariably requires information on race, religion and gender. Even if application forms may not require these details, most agencies are linked online to the National Registration Department where background checks can be done on the individual's race, religion and sex. These data have been the basis of many policies and programs of the government, including analyses on voting trends. Political and economic analyses in Sabah and Sarawak have often focused on Muslim *bumiputera* and non-Muslim *bumiputera*, where the *bumiputera* status

is supposed to include the *Orang Asal* along with the Malays.¹

The federal government introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 to address societal imbalances, with the twin goals of reducing poverty across the board and redistributing wealth to the *bumiputera* through affirmative action. This complemented constitutional references to the special rights of the *bumiputera*, which covered quotas in civil service, scholarship allocation, university enrolment and business licenses. The NEP was formally replaced by other development policies in 1991 and 2001, which shifted attention to 'balanced development' to reduce income inequality between and within ethnicities, including the *Orang Asal* population in Sabah and Sarawak who continue to represent the poorest in Malaysia today. The *Orang Asal* have obviously not benefited from the constitutional provision for *bumiputera* status.

“The conception of identity in Malaysia is very much centered on race, religion and sex and this is no different in Sabah and Sarawak.

Image: www.news.mongabay.com



¹Literally meaning “sons of the earth,” *bumiputera* refers to Malays and other indigenous peoples in Malaysia — *the editor*



Image: www.thepatriots.asia

“The *Orang Asal* have obviously not benefited from the constitutional provision for *bumiputera* status.

The fact that there is no specific recognition of the *Orang Asal* as a group is seen to have contributed to decades of neglect. In most application forms, ethnic identities do not go beyond the conception of the three main races in Malaysia (Malays, Chinese and Indians) and indigenous communities are forced to categorize themselves under “*lain-lain*” (literally, others).

Use of Identity Politics among the *Orang Asal*

In Sabah and Sarawak, identity markers that distinguishes the *Orang Asal* are their unique collective social, cultural, and political systems, which communities struggle to maintain and pass on to their next generation. The *Orang Asal* social system that focuses on the role of elders in the community, maintaining close family relations and the teaching of the *adat*² are still upheld even for families who have settled in urban areas for work or education. Probably the most apparent are the indigenous cultural identity markers, which not only encompass cultural practices (dances, food,

drinks, costumes and celebrations) but also beliefs, health practices and resource management systems. Political identity markers that are apparent include administrative/governance systems (traditional leaders such as native chiefs and village heads) and juridical systems (customary laws and native courts).

These conceptualizations of identity have become a political tool that have unfortunately become entrenched in political organizing by successive governments in Sabah and Sarawak. Probably the most effective way has been the political appointment of traditional leaders and other community leaders into influential positions such as native chiefs, village chiefs and village development councils. Since these leaders are also the conduits for social services, aid and development projects, they can also be powerful influencers in the community. Another political tool that capitalizes on indigenous identity is the mobilization of close-knit community social relations whereby parents and elders are targeted to influence the children's voting during elections.

²*Adat* refers to the customary laws of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia and Indonesia — *the editor*.



Image: www.hmetro.com.my

“Decades of identity politics in Sabah and Sarawak had eroded harmonious relations and influenced the *Orang Asal's* voting patterns through a politics of personality, patronage and ethno-nationalism.

Decades of identity politics in Sabah and Sarawak had eroded harmonious relations and influenced the *Orang Asal's* voting patterns through a politics of personality, patronage and ethno-nationalism.

Personality politics that promotes the psycho-cultural aspect of political culture has been effective among the *Orang Asal*. The personal attributes of political figures not only include the person's charisma, his (or his family's) legacy and

contribution to society but they also entail creating and promoting new and traditional titles and roles in the community. For example, among the Kadazan and Dusun indigenous communities in Sabah, the title of *Huguan Siou* (Paramount Leader) and *Huguan Siou Lundu Mirongod* (Brave Paramount Thinker) are only conferred to political figures. Personality politics works because the *Orang Asal* communities have always placed importance on culture and their traditional leaders, and thus, this is the way which political socialization have been capitalized today.

Under the guise of providing development for its constituents, patronage politics in Sabah and Sarawak have flourished, with political parties and its representatives using his influence, position and social status to garner support. Many political parties have been patronizing cultural associations for political organizing. For example, ethnic-based cultural associations of the Kadazan, Dusun, Bajau and Murut communities in Sabah are often used as platforms for outreach and organizing by political parties capitalizing on cultural celebrations and other activities of the associations.

Throughout more than two decades of the *Barisan Nasional* (National Alliance) in power, the rural areas where most of the *Orang Asal* reside are in dire need of infrastructure development. Voting patterns among the *Orang Asal* indicate that they have continued to support the ruling coalition due to the lures of development promises, cash distribution and government aid. For decades, the *Orang Asal* were bombarded with information that only the ruling coalition had the capability and resources to provide development. Even after the rise of the opposition in 2008 and 2018 that promised to promote programmatic development, patronage politics is still pervasive in most rural areas. The fact that the *Orang Asal* territories in Sabah and Sarawak are underdeveloped and that the people continue to live in poverty means that infrastructure development and direct economic aid from the government are considered a necessity and this fact is one of the key elements of patronage politics here.

The uneasy federal-state relation in the context of the MA63, and the years of perceived socio-economic and political neglect make it easy for ethno-nationalism that looks at the notion of nation and nationality in ethnic terms to take root in the political landscape of Sabah and Sarawak. The uncontrolled influx of undocumented migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia into Sabah became hot political issues among the *Orang Asal* who felt threatened by the sheer number of migrants arriving and the federal

government's response (or lack of it), which did not actively involve the Sabah government or were seen to be used for political control. The Sabah coalition government of the day focused its elections campaign in 2020 in creating fear that the opposition party, Warisan (Heritage Party) was planning to pave the way for undocumented migrants to apply for citizenship.

Additionally, capitalizing on primordial sentiments (which emphasize affinity towards one's racial or religious group) have changed Sabah's political parties from being multi-racial to being more ethnic-based. Despite the fact that Sabah and Sarawak communities have often been commended for their ethnically diverse yet harmonious relationship, the divide and rule mindsets have become deeply rooted in its political landscape and it has become harder to mainstream pluralistic approaches.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Social democratic principles that embody pluralism and diversity as part and parcel of democracy and social equality are embraced by the Democratic Action Party (DAP). However, there is still a serious lack of understanding on the situation of the *Orang Asal* in Malaysia, and more so for the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. While the party has been promoting pluralistic values and diverse representations, it has been finding it difficult to attract more indigenous members and leaders.

A rights-based approach to the Malaysia Agreement of 1963, championing devolution of power and self-governance, and understanding issues close to the heart of the natives of Sabah and Sarawak that befits DAP's social democratic principles would refute sentiments that it is a "Malayan" party.

In general, the efforts by civil society and by political parties to promote progressive democratic values, to push for the adoption of anti-discrimination laws, and accession to relevant international human rights treaties have largely been unsuccessful. Providing sustained political education and better access to information for *Orang Asal* communities and leaders, and especially among young voters, would definitely negate the influence of identity politics.

Social democrats must strengthen efforts towards recognition of *Orang Asal* rights and strengthen support on issues that are of key concern to indigenous peoples such as land rights, rural development and undocumented migrants, while also countering parochial sentiments. There must



Image: www.cilisos.my

“Social democrats must strengthen efforts towards recognition of *Orang Asal* rights and strengthen support on issues that are of key concern to indigenous people.

be a consensus among all political parties to develop other conduits for development, aid and social services that would eventually remove political patronage. The move by the Registrar of Societies to outlaw patronage by political figures in cultural and educational organizations should not only be supported but also monitored so it does not favor those currently in government.

Efforts by DAP lawmakers in Sabah and Sarawak to remove political appointments away from traditional governance, and to support and strengthen traditional institutions must be followed through. At the same time, DAP as a party, could study and learn from the indigenous peoples' concept of consensus-building, which could contribute to building institutions that promote harmonious leadership. ■

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By: Carlo Angelo Vargas

Filipino Identity, Patronage, and Citizenship

The Philippines has entered a new era in its political history with the election of Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. and Sara Duterte to the presidency and vice-presidency, respectively. The return of the Marcoses to power and the transformation of the Duterte family into a national-level political dynasty were two separate political projects that had been years in the making. Both families have used the tools of mythmaking to cultivate personal narratives that resonate with the visceral sentiments of Filipinos.

In many ways, the power and attraction of the new political order not only represents the repudiation of the old liberal democratic order but also the shaping of Filipino identity through the country's culture of patronage. What does Duterte's election in 2016 and the landslide victory of Bongbong Marcos say about how Filipinos see themselves and how it affects Philippine society? In answering this question, one is tempted to conclude that Filipino identity is rooted in the rejection of modernity and antipathy towards formal structures of democracy and human rights. However, we must also see that the country's tumultuous history of colonialism, elite democracy, patronage politics, and conservative rule has served to accustom Filipinos to see themselves as passive witnesses to the unfolding of the country's history, rather than as empowered citizens involved in the project of creating the modern Filipino nation-state.

Many have commented that the Marcos-Duterte coalition benefitted from and cultivated a nostalgia for strongman rule. They were also able to create a machinery of disinformation that was decisive for their victory. Equally important is the forging of the broadest unity of political dynasties and traditional political interests from the national down to the local level. This scale of consolidation is important not just during but in between elections. Political clans at the local level are able to promise and deliver votes to national politicians (themselves members of local political clans) in exchange for access to public funds for their constituents. Voters themselves have an understanding that votes are exchanged for material benefit, but they also hope that a strong relationship between them and their patrons can open opportunities for healthcare, education, and other public services.

Filipinos, like many Asian societies, rely on their family and social networks for support. While reforms in the past, such as the push for universal healthcare and free tuition in state universities, have enlarged existing social safety nets, most Filipinos are still largely dependent on their connections to get ahead in life. It is an unspoken rule that family members who are able to finish their college education and enter a profession will set aside a part of their income to give back to their parents or siblings even after they already



Image: www.wellnessphilippines.com

“Most Filipinos are still largely dependent on their connections to get ahead in life.

have a family of their own. Filipinos who choose to work overseas send remittances back home to improve the socio-economic status of their families. These overseas Filipinos are able to lift their relatives out of poverty and enter the middle class through these remittances. Even the Philippine economy is itself heavily reliant on these remittances which keeps the economy afloat and has contributed to a growing consumer economy. These ties do not end when one enters adulthood but only alters the expectations that is expected by one's family members. Marriage and building your own family are seen as expanding those family and social networks. In many ways, such social networks are a net positive given that the government is an unreliable provider of basic social services. When Filipinos face any emergency, they, more often than not, rely on their family and social networks. It is no surprise that even former President Duterte used these strong family networks to maintain his popularity with Filipinos.

These strong social networks can, therefore, further cement unequal relations between the powerful and the powerless. It can be used to justify passivity and rationalize the elite's continued domination of the country's politics and economy. Political elites in the country utilize these strong bonds as a way to foster public support and acceptance of their rule. Rather than purely transactional, these relations are much more rooted on trust. These interlinking and informal social relations can be characterized as patron-client relationships. The patron's political office is seen as an instrument for dispensing their duties and to use the resources that come with political office to provide to their constituents, specifically the constituents who are their clients and voters. Clients see their act of voting as part of their duties and a demonstration of their strong bond with their patron. Such a relationship is almost always to the benefit of the politician and to the detriment of his constituents. These types of social relations have served to limit the Filipinos' capacity to participate in governance despite economic growth and rising incomes in the last few decades.



Image: www.benarnews.org

“Social democrats and progressives must engage in the project of social transformation and help Filipinos to see themselves as citizens rather than as recipients of patronage.

Patron-client relations have also prevented Filipinos from further developing the idea of citizenship. Citizenship as an identity is built on respecting the innate rights of individuals. For democratic states, this means such relations are built on universal human rights and the duty of the state to look after the welfare of its citizens. As progressives and social democrats, this means pursuing social transformation by empowering citizens to see themselves as possessing civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that states must respect and safeguard. Under this arrangement, patron-client relationships should not exist. Does this mean strengthening citizenship means sacrificing the strong social bonds and relations that underpin clientelism? This should not be the case, and it is important that we offer a transformative and new way of harmonizing existing social relations with individual rights, even as we create a more egalitarian society.

As mentioned earlier, the rising income and economic growth that the country has experienced has existed despite the continued marginalization of most Filipinos from the political life of the country. Despite guaranteeing the right to vote for all Filipinos 18 years old and above, political participation is still less than ideal. Elections are still seen as being the way how political democracy is exercised. But without a significant avenue for people's participation in governance, this can lead to political pessimism. Rising incomes and financial security of a growing middle class without accompanying political empowerment can lead to voters embracing populist movements and candidates.

It is important for social democrats and progressives to engage in the project of social transformation and help empower Filipinos to see themselves as citizens rather than as recipients of patronage. This necessitates accepting that strong familial relations and social networks must be used to advance progressive politics. Rather than undermining these social relations, we have to strengthen them. The economic and social changes in the country brought about by capital-led economic growth have created conditions that encourage precariousness and social anxiety. These social networks have ensured that individuals and communities that have been displaced by these changes have a network to fall back on. Progressives must use these relations, not to undermine and disempower, but to forward a progressive vision of society and citizenship.

Our existing concepts of family, kinship and personal relationships, insofar as they are utilized to further patronage politics, must be reimagined to transcend our immediate communities to encompass the Filipino nation as a family. Instead of seeing the nation or a future social democratic state as an impersonal and cold institution, we have to imagine it as how we see our own social networks. This also means Filipinos, instead of seeing themselves as either clients or patrons in hierarchical arrangements, should instead see themselves as part of a broader Filipino “family” of equals that is inclusive of everyone.

In times of great crisis, these family and social networks have the potential of radical transformation and progressive politics. Instead of allowing populist, reactionary and conservative forces to determine the arrangement how such social relations and by extension determine Filipino identity, progressives must see these networks as spaces of contestation. ■

By: Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee

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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The Making of an Opposition

As soon as the incumbent vice president declared her presidential bid in October 2021, supporters started expressing their support by painting the social media newsfeed pink — the chosen color of the Robredo campaign. But the influx of support for Robredo's candidacy came in at the start of the campaign period in early February 2022.

The slate led by Leni Robredo and her running mate Senator Francis “Kiko” Pangilinan was weak in terms of machinery and base votes, but was strong on platforms and representation. The senatorial slate included labor leader Sonny Matula, and congressman Teddy Baguilat who is a proud Igorot (an indigenous group in Northern Luzon). Labor and indigenous peoples are sectors that are gravely underrepresented in Philippine politics. However, Matula and Baguilat, while teeming with promises for the sectors that they each represent, did not have the money nor the machinery to launch a competitive campaign for the Senate. The same could be said about human rights lawyer Chel Diokno who ran for senator the second time this 2022. Diokno was also part of the defeated opposition slate of the 2019 midterm elections.

Apart from slate members coming from the underrepresented and marginalized, the Robredo-Pangilinan slate also included staunch opposition figures who consistently and openly resisted the Duterte regime even if it meant sacrificing their liberties. Senator Leila de Lima who assumed office in 2016 was implicated in a drug trafficking scandal that allegedly took place in the New Bilibid Prison, which operated under her office as Justice Secretary from 2010-2015. De Lima is arguably the staunchest critic of Rodrigo Duterte. In her days as the Chairperson of the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, de Lima launched an investigation against the Davao Death Squad — a vigilante that terrorized Davao reported to be operated by then Davao Mayor Rodrigo Duterte. At the onset of the Duterte presidency seven years later, neophyte senator Leila de Lima was at the helm of the opposition against the bloody drug war that killed tens of thousands of Filipinos in police and vigilante operations. Less than a year within the Duterte presidency, criminal charges were filed against de Lima who was subsequently detained. As of this writing, key witnesses who testified against de Lima already recanted their testimonies. Senator Leila de Lima has now been imprisoned albeit without conviction for five years.

Among the senatorial candidates in the Robredo-Pangilinan slate is another key opposition figure and former Senator Antonio “Sonny” Trillanes III.

Trillanes, apart from condemning the war on drugs, initiated exposés of corruption and drug trafficking against the President, his cronies, and his family. Trillanes, then, was barraged by various lawsuits filed by Duterte allies that included inciting to sedition, libel, kidnapping, and other civil cases. Trillanes, who was imprisoned for coup d'état charges in 2003, was given amnesty in 2011 together with the other soldiers involved in the 2003 Oakwood Mutiny and 2007 siege of Manila Peninsula Hotel. In September 2018, Duterte tried to send him back to jail by revoking his amnesty. After his defeat in his 2016 vice-presidential bid, Sonny Trillanes remained as a vocal critic of the administration.

The strongest candidate in the senatorial slate of the opposition was incumbent Senator Risa Hontiveros. She was the lone opposition candidate who successfully made it to the Magic 12 after a consistently good showing in pre-election surveys. For the incoming Marcos presidency, Hontiveros would be the highest-ranking opposition figure in the country. But what made Hontiveros' candidacy under the opposition slate important is the fact that she is the sole Philippine senator with a social movement background. Hontiveros, who is neither a part of the country's political elite nor a celebrity, is national chairperson of the progressive and socialist Akbayan Citizens' Action Party, which she also represented in the Lower House as a party-list representative from 2004-2010. Hontiveros is known for her unfaltering advocacy of gender equality and universal healthcare. As a neophyte senator, Hontiveros championed legislations on expanded maternity leave, safe streets and public spaces, SOGIE equality, divorce, solo parents' welfare, and mental health, among others. In the years to come, Hontiveros would be at the helm, not only of the opposition against Marcos Jr., but also of the ideological politics that should champion feminist, humane, and democratic causes.

Despite the obvious disadvantage of the opposition slate, hope was found in the strength showcased in the large sorties that regularly drew hundreds of thousands of people from February to May 2022. The tempest of support for Leni Robredo, Kiko Pangilinan, and the rest of the opposition slate, which was seen in rallies from the Marcos bailiwicks in the north to the Duterte territory in the south, was stuff of history.

Under the Pink Flag: Strength in the Pluralities of Struggles and Identities

The quality and the diversity exemplified by the members of the opposition slate was telling of the kind of politics that the campaign aspired to

embody. However, it was the gargantuan rallies and sorties among their supporters that revealed the hope that we can derive from what looked like a fledgling democratic movement. Week after week, various provinces from the three major island groups of the Philippines showed up with behemoth crowds clad in pink, and armed with self-made placards and different campaign paraphernalia. In the months leading up to the campaign, individual volunteers set up local people's councils that coordinated all of the campaign efforts in different areas. Sectors also came together to form groups that served as organizers of these grand rallies. The most visible of which were Youth for Leni, LGBT for Leni and the Robredo People's Councils in almost every province. Artists, performers, musicians, and celebrities showed up in these rallies and did not only bravely express their support, but also performed and hosted for free. The pink rallies that literally filled long stretches of streets in the country's National Capital Region and enormous people's parks and grandstands in the provinces were indeed nothing short of spectacular.

Arguably, however, what buttressed the success of each rally for the opposition bid of Leni Robredo and her slate was the availability of organic space that allowed for the expression of identities and struggles—from the smallest and the most mundane struggles, to the largest and most recognized ones; from the most particular markers of identity to the most universal ones. The assortment of groups that expressed their support for Robredo and for the pink campaign were visible in both social media and physical gatherings. Groups like Women for Leni stood alongside groups that referred to themselves as Bikers for Leni. There was a group called Health Workers for Leni and groups that humorously referred to themselves as *Mga Gwapo for Leni* (Handsome guys for Leni). Farmers for Leni-Kiko were cheered on by groups that make fun of their relationship status and called themselves Singles for Leni. While there were young people who organized the group ARMY for Leni (ARMY being the name of the fan base of the phenomenal K-Pop group BTS), there were also the workers of the BPO industry who organized themselves into a group called BPO Employees for Leni-Kiko.

More than an expression of particular identities and struggles, we could say that the emergence of these groups were also expressions of creativity and wit. Toward the tail-end of the campaign, Robredo supporters posted photographs of themselves on social media *en masse*. Each of the photograph was framed with different “for Leni” labels that include the most random identification like “Single Parents for Leni-Kiko,” and



Image: www.lenirobredo.com

“What buttressed the success of each rally for the opposition bid of Leni Robredo and her slate was the availability of organic space that allowed for the expression of identities and struggles.

“Mathematicians for Leni”; and the greatest aspirations like *“Mga Uhaw sa Good Governance for Leni-Kiko”* (Those who are thirsty for good governance for Leni-Kiko).

Apart from the multiplicity of the levels of struggles and identities that were present in the pink campaign, there was also the presence of various groups and sectors that came from the farthest parts of the ideological and political spectrum. The same pink rallies attended by delegations from various Catholic groups also had strong LGBT sector visibilities. Militant labor groups and organizations often identified with the far left rallied alongside a party-list identified with a section of the Armed Forces. Indigenous peoples' groups stood alongside entrepreneurs and professionals. The long history of acrimony and division among labor groups and trade unions coming from different ideological groups were set aside in the formation of ALL4Leni or Alliance of Labor Leaders for Leni.



Image: www.lenirobredo.com

At the declaration of her candidacy in October 2021, Robredo called on her supporters to take a stand and inspire others to stand with them. In the months that followed, this was what happened precisely. Without waiting for directives and resources from the campaign team of Leni Robredo and Kiko Pangilinan, volunteer groups sprang in different parts of the country. Groups organized small gatherings and Pink Marches. Others set up kiosks and booths in busy streets to distribute campaign materials like fliers and posters for Leni, and free food. From their own pockets, supporters printed their own designs for Leni Robredo posters, t-shirts, and stickers.

In the last two months, countless groups heeded the call of Robredo's second daughter, Tricia Robredo to go beyond virtual campaigning and polarizing conversations on social media and engage in real-life and face-to-face conversations. In a feat never seen before, groups of friends, colleagues, and local networks of volunteers, went to communities, neighborhoods, public markets, and transport terminals where they talked to individuals and households on why Leni Robredo and Kiko Pangilinan were the best choice as the country's next leaders. These volunteers used their own money to produce campaign paraphernalia and buy snacks for distribution. In some encounters, volunteers were subjected to heckling by the supporters of other presidential candidates, but they were undaunted. Later on, national celebrities, social media influencers, and artists volunteered and joined house-to-house campaigns themselves.

Two days before election day, the Robredo-Pangilinan slate held a historic grand rally or *Miting de Avance* in Makati City. Various estimates of the crowd who showed up range from 800,000 to 1 million people. This final and ultimate rally was a fitting culmination of the rallies held in

“The pink movement borne out of this election harnessed its strength in the diversity of struggles, which successfully found a point of solidarity.

different parts of the country for the past three months. As an attendee of some of these rallies myself, hope was palpable and contagious. Despite the weak showing in the last pre-election surveys, seeing the gargantuan crowds really triggered hope for a miracle which did not come.

Sad Endings and New Beginnings: Writing the Hopeful Epilogue of the Pink Movement

By the evening of May 9, the highly engaged supporters of Leni Robredo were crestfallen. Early in the counting of votes, the lead of Marcos, Jr. quickly widened. Before the night ended, Robredo addressed her supporters, expressed her gratitude, and spoke of her hope in the movement that she witnessed in the campaign trail. “*Nagsisimula pa lang tayo*” (we are only just beginning) and “*Hindi na muling pipikit ang mga namulat na*” (Those whose eyes were opened won't shut them again) were her words that both consoled and called on her supporters to action. In the following days, Robredo declared her intention to draw on the strength of the networks built on the campaign trail to continue working for people's welfare and empowerment.

If measured in terms of the election outcome, then one can easily appraise the Robredo campaign as a failure. However, the behemoth crowds that showed up in each campaign rally of Robredo in spite of her weak showing in the surveys indicate a highly-engaged collective of supporters that did not only believe in the platforms laid down by Robredo, but also rejected the legacies of the outgoing Duterte presidency and the restoration of the Marcoses in the country's leadership. The level of engagement is enough reason to believe that an organization of a democratic movement that imagines a participative and empowering governance, better social services, and vehemently opposes corruption and despotism is not far-fetched.

Judging from the constitution of this highly-engaged supporters, we could argue that distinct from movements in the past, where homogeneity of identities and experience is a major foundation, the pink movement borne out of this election harnessed its strength in the diversity of struggles, which successfully found a point of solidarity: a hope for a new kind of politics that values inclusivity, equality, and diversity. ■

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