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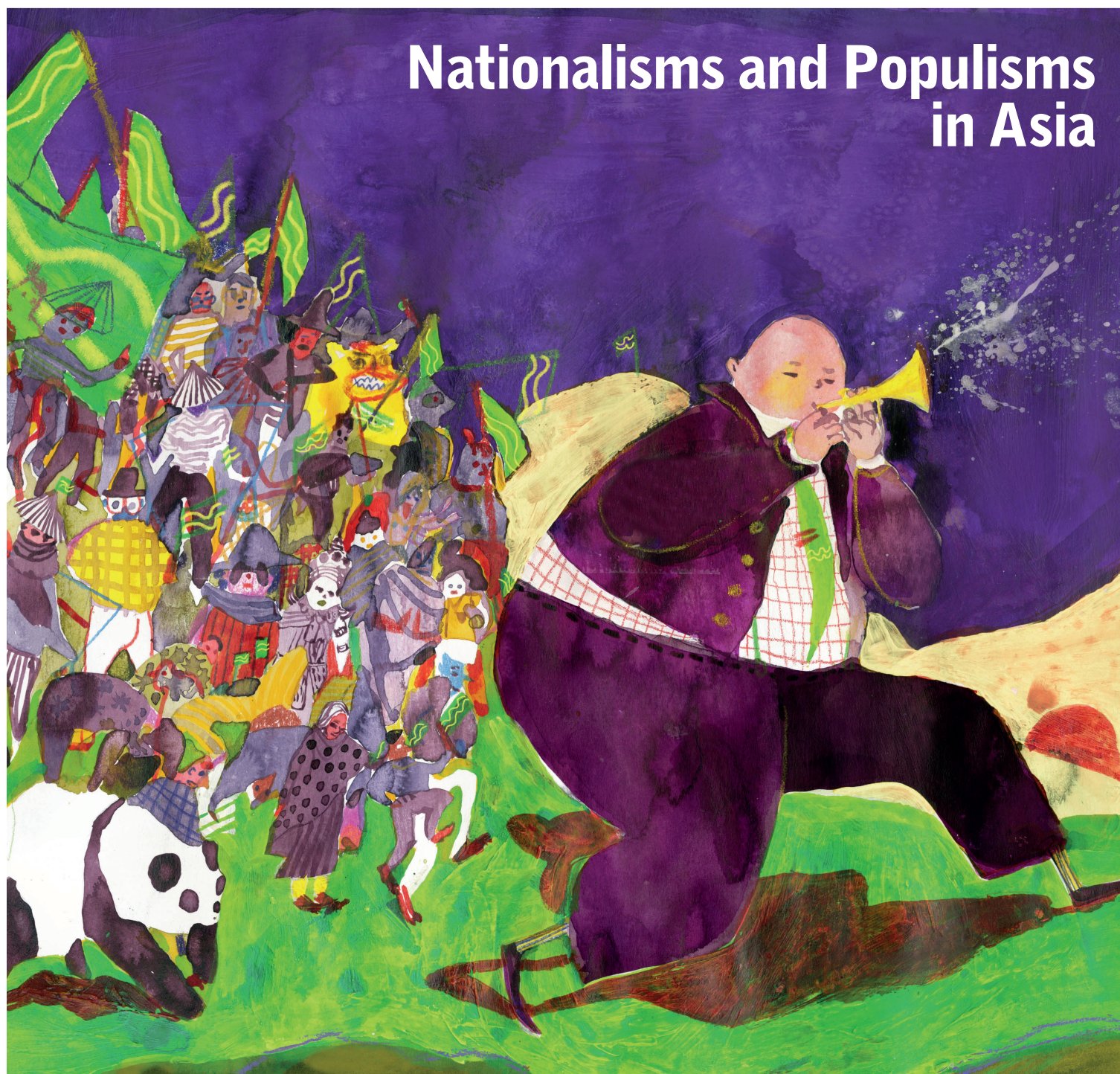
# perspectives

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## Nationalisms and Populisms in Asia



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## Heinrich Böll Foundation

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is a publicly funded institute that is closely affiliated with the German party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. From our headquarters in Berlin and 33 overseas offices, we promote green ideas and projects in Germany, as well as in more than 60 countries worldwide. Our work in Asia concentrates on promoting civil society, democratic structures, social participation for all women and men, and global justice. Together with our partners, we work toward conflict prevention, peaceful dispute resolution, and search for solutions in the fight against environmental degradation and the depletion of global resources. To achieve these goals, we rely on disseminating knowledge, creating a deeper understanding between actors in Europe and Asia, and on a global dialogue as a prerequisite for constructive negotiations.

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# Introduction

Nationalistic sentiments spurred by populist rhetoric have been on the rise globally. Asia is no exception to this trend. Some Asian leaders communicate visions that can instill a feeling of pride, creating a rarely felt sense of belonging among people. Yet the current streak of Asian nationalism can also become a setback for democracy and human rights.

The Indian author and Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore warned in 1917 that “nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, eating into its moral vitality.” But Tagore did not live to see that for some Asian countries, nationalist movements also bore liberating elements, leading to independent nations that attained political freedom for the first time. During World War I, many subjects in Asia under colonial rule came together under various social movements. They all sought to articulate identities and histories that would explicitly distinguish them from their colonizers and endow them with political self-confidence. In that sense, Asian nationalisms in the 19th and 20th centuries created communities that drew together people that had been oppressed and humiliated for decades in the hope of a self-determined future.

Asian nationalisms therefore cannot be condemned as something solely destructive. Rather the contrary, the histories of Asian independence movements show that the idea of a nation conferred agency to the people and assured them that they are entitled to equal rights. Nationalism in many Asian countries is thus closely linked with the birth of the nation-state and the struggle against colonial rule.

However, the rise of nationalism experienced in Asia today is utterly different from the past. Today, nationalism seems to be less about self-determination and more about emphasizing differences in ethnicity, gender or religion. It is an attempt to define an “us” against a “them.” The idea of a nation therefore becomes exclusive to only a few. This feeling of exclusivity and national privilege is cleverly fostered by populist politicians.

This is when nationalism becomes alarming because it is abused by politicians to obtain or preserve power. Today, we can witness divisive, populist nationalism in some Asian countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Myanmar. Given the lack of free expression and assembly in many places, discussions and political debates are stunted and Asian political leaders are trying to obscure this by impos-



ing national mythologies. Populists thus bend the history, religion or culture of a country to become inseparable with their own political goals. This political approach is bearing fruit because some people feel left behind by technological change, the globalized economy or growing inequality and others develop national self-confidence due to economic progress in their countries. Both groups tend to find comfort in the telling of historic or religious events.

Nationalism in Asia has undergone a transformation. From the independence movements beginning in the late 19th century until today, a shift took place from a universal, civic nationalism toward a more ethnic or religious nationalism that insists on differences between and within countries. This is dangerous because it threatens to reverse the accomplishments of modern human rights movements. Rodrigo Duterte's remarks that he does not care about human rights should alarm every citizen, because in the long run, such attitudes are undermining democracy.

The latest issue of *Perspectives Asia* aims to draw a fine line between different forms of nationalism. The articles from various Asian countries focus on strategies and political

styles adopted by populist leaders and explain how nationalistic and religious ideas are distorted by politics. Some contributions reveal past colonial structures that still exist in governments. Others make the argument that a shared sense of nationalism can also be fruitful to the development of a country such as Afghanistan, or in Malaysia, where the last elections in May 2018 made people believe in a radical change that could benefit the country. Eventually, the issue also shows that people are not merely being instrumentalized by a small political elite, but that the belief of who belongs to a nation is a complicated nexus of historic developments that are still deeply rooted in people's minds and modern global trends.

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# “Nationalism that violates the dignity of human beings deserves condemnation”

An interview with Bonn Juego by Ella Soesanto and Fabian Heppe

Globally, strong political leaders are increasingly controlling governments – that is also the case in many Asian countries. But what makes them successful in mobilizing the masses and making people believe in their populist visions?

Donald Trump or Rodrigo Duterte, Victor Orban or Hun Sen. As in the Western hemisphere, populist politicians with a nationalistic agenda are on the rise in Asia. How do you explain their popularity?

From a general viewpoint, the relative popularity of right-wing populist politicians and nationalist movements arises from the protracted crises of liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism across the world. We are at a historical moment when the ideological hegemony of American-European liberalism is being challenged by various interest groups, particularly from both the political right and the political left at the same time. Asia's present and future are engaged in these conflict-ridden processes of change. The emerging version of nationalistic ideologies in parts of Asia today can be construed both as a symptom of, and a response to, these crises.

What do the Asian responses look like and do they have common characteristics?

It is important to recognize Asia's diversity and evolution to avoid the mistake of making sweeping and hasty generalizations about social processes. The resurgence of nationalism in different parts of Asia must be understood in terms of their respective historical contexts. The idea of nationalism consistently informs the conduct of economic strategy and international relations of the Communist Party of China. President Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream, notably the Belt and Road Initiative, is a foreign policy pursued with a view to China's domestic economic development and its project for national revival. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte effectively used the rhetoric of nationalism in his presidential campaign; but now that he is in power, his administration's external affairs hardly embody an independent foreign policy. In the case of Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist bloc in India, the discourses of nationalism are largely shaped by dominant political, ethnic and caste interests in the spheres of society and culture and by capitalist class dynamics in economic relations. Nationalistic movements in Asia have reemerged from different narratives – ranging from ethno-religious ideologies in India and Myanmar, to historical revisionism in Japan and racial purity in the Koreas. Yet the activities of these reactionary social forces are not contributing to the betterment of human conditions and relations.

**Bonn Juego** is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer specializing in the intersection between political economy, development studies, and international relations at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His recent publications and research endeavors are focused on the geographical areas of East and Southeast Asia, the Global South, and Nordic-Asia relations. In the autumn of 2018, he is a Visiting Fellow at the South East Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong.

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But Asian history has shown that nationalism can be a positive force of change. The decolonization movements in India in the 1940s were largely driven by nationalistic ideas such as self-sovereignty. What is different this time?

The idea of nationalism can be healthy if it is merely used as an ideological tool toward a broader liberating objective, and not as a political goal itself. The nationalism ideology in Mahatma Gandhi's independence movement is not the same as the extreme nationalist, racist and nativist agenda of far-right groups. Historically, third-world nationalism in different countries in Asia was progressive, for it was a resistance movement pursued in the spirit of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. It was inspired by an anti-colonial national consciousness, rather than by the viciousness of racial aggrandizement. It was focused on the collective aspirations of the people for liberation, rather than on an abstract devotion to a nation. It was based on unifying diverse peoples and multiple classes against the power of imperialist oppressors, rather than on annihilating cultural diversity by one ethnic, religious or racial group. It was also a legitimate articulation for historical justice and truth-seeking, rather than a deceitful project of historical revisionism and lies.

So to a certain degree nationalism was necessary in the struggle for independence from foreign occupiers. How did this period of decolonization lead to the nationalism that we can find in Asia today?

Asia's decolonization process is far from complete. This is partly because Eurocentrism has not been uprooted in Western ideology and praxis. The concepts of “The White Man's Burden” and “Civilizing Mission” persist – that is, the conviction that Europe and the United States are the models of, and must lead the world toward, modernity, progress and enlightenment. Importantly, the so-called decolonization process also led to a certain form of “new colonialism” as the Asian countries became fully integrated into the global production system and international division of labor, serving as peripheral nation-states to core capitalist centers. The real inequalities created by this new form of colonialism under conditions of neoliberal globalization greatly contributed to the popularity of nationalist parties and their rhetoric, notwithstanding their shallow and backward sense of nationalism.

Only right-wing politicians seem to profit from the current crises. Why are populists in Asia so successful in mobilizing the masses, in contrast to the liberal left?

During this conjunctural crisis, no ideological camp can already claim victory. A new balance of social forces is competing for hegemony. The liberal elites are persistent in their efforts to conserve their somewhat dominant position. Sections of the political left are also constructing their alternative programs. But, indeed, Asia's right-wing populist politicians have exhibited more advantages in catching the zeitgeist. Firstly, the discursive framing in populism is done by echoing both the most basic day-to-day issues (such as inefficient public services and street crime) and the most fundamental social problems (such as colonial history, oligarchical corruption and class inequalities). This populist message resonates well with people's lived experiences and their legitimate fears, insecurities, resentments, hopes and anxieties. Right-wing populists construct a language – including images for social media propaganda – that has high impact appeal on emotions. Ironically, the anti-elite and anti-establishment slogans are essentially leftist discourses that have been appropriated by the political right. Secondly, the historical contradictions within the liberal-democratic order are being revealed, especially for countries that have undergone social uprisings or a period of

transition from authoritarianism, such as Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. The problem with “liberal” uprisings is not only about their short-lived and futile deprivation of the civil liberties of the deposed autocrats, but more crucially about their failure to reclaim and redistribute the state assets stolen by despots, their families and business cronies. The democratization processes in Asia focused much on promoting the ideals of political liberty, without simultaneously realizing the goals of socio-economic equality and human solidarity. Thirdly, mass mobilizations of the right in present-day Asia are distinctly organized around charismatic leaders, or a personality cult, from Cambodia’s Hun Sen and the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte to India’s Narendra Modi and Pakistan’s Imran Khan. A leader’s charisma is a compelling source of power and authority in Asian societies. At the moment, there are hardly any charismatic personalities or figureheads who could muster and command a faithful following among Asia’s political left and liberals.

All of these leaders that you mention are men who have publicly displayed macho and misogynist behavior. Pakistani President Imran Khan said that feminism degraded the role of motherhood while President Duterte is applauded for his rape jokes. How are nationalism and sexism interlinked in Asia?

Some right nationalist groups are connected to conservative politics. The conservative vision for nation-building is the renewal of cultural traditions – including the social system of patriarchy, which preserves masculine privilege by subordinating or repressing women and other sexual minorities. The exclusivist strain of nationalism protects the belief in the uniformity of its women citizens through politics of homogenization by differentiating its own race from others. Nevertheless, the normalization of macho, misogynist, and homophobic language of populist leaders and their supporters has the effect of creating a climate that legitimizes physical violence against girls, women and sexual minorities.

Yet Duterte’s outrageous, misogynistic and homophobic comments did not have a substantial negative impact on his popularity ratings. Sections of women and the LGBTQ community are among Duterte’s passionate and loyal supporters, even defending his macho remarks and behavior toward women.

A distinctive characteristic of populism is its capacity for catch-all politics and cross-class alliances which, in turn, have a divide-and-rule effect among possible opposition groups. Populist politicians – and nationalist right movements – can play identity politics to their advantage. They choose to be unconstrained by the norms of political correctness, and this enables them to publicly express popular beliefs and opinions, such as machismo and sexism, that are held deep in the psyche of many people. Hence, there are significant limitations on the liberal approach in using identity politics as critique against right-wing populism. The game of identity politics being played by both the populist right and the liberal elites is at best a distraction from the fundamental point of social conflict, and at worst a cause of the divide-and-conquer of possible solidarity of the oppressed multitude. Pursuing identity politics against the sexism and racism of the populist and nationalist right is an important tactical step toward the formation of broad, organized resistance against an oppressive socio-economic system. But opposition against right-wing nationalism and populism should be focused on political orientation and class interests, rather than on gender identity issues. Understanding the connections and underlying causes of all forms of oppression and exploitation based on class, race, gender and sexual orientation is the order of the day to transcend the drawbacks of identity politics and to oppose regressive populism.



Another field, next to gender politics, where divide-and-conquer tactics are used is in the realm of refugee policies. In Europe, the so-called refugee crisis is fueling nationalistic debates and giving more legitimacy to anti-liberal forces. From an Asian perspective, what do you think about the debates on refugee and immigration policy in Europe?

In Europe, the recent popularity of right-wing, anti-immigrant parties is strongly linked to the immigration and refugee crises. However, Western debates between the nationalist right, liberals, and even the political left, overlook the fact that the refugees from Africa and the Middle East are victims of US and EU foreign policies and invasions of their communities – thus, they are fleeing underdevelopment and war conditions. The discourses on democracy and favoring immigration that the liberals and some sections of the left have adopted to address the refugee crisis are creating even more problems. While the liberal and leftist discourse on the refugee question is more humane than the rightist punitive policies of closing borders, expulsion or criminalization, such discursive focus plays into the hands of the right and ultra-nationalist political forces. Instead, what must be highlighted in the public dialogue is that wars of conquest and maldevelopment are the fundamental causes of the refugee crises and mass immigration. Campaigns seeking to end imperialist wars, reparations for crimes against humanity in accordance with international law, and long-term funds for the reconstruction of the productive sectors of the developing economies might be potent alternatives to the populist right’s discourse on extreme nationalism.

Does the question of refugees also play a role in Asian nationalistic developments?

In Asia, several refugee and immigration problems are rooted in internal displacements due to conflicts, poverty, environmental disaster and political persecution. Others can be traced back to the colonial legacy of displacing ethnic communities, such as the case of Rohingya refugees in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Therefore, for both the European and Asian experiences, the explanation of the political consequences of the refugee and immigration crises cannot be reduced to the abstract concept of nationalism. Underpinning the nationalist ideology are different and overlapping political, ethnic, religious, business and economic interests. Oftentimes, it is interest rather than ideology that determines the motivation of stakeholders and politically conscious actors. When looking into the behavior of the political right toward refugees and immigrants, more attention should be paid to the diseases of Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism and discrimination, rather than to abstract nationalism.

However, in Myanmar the ongoing humanitarian crisis of nearly a million minority Rohingya Muslim refugees in the Rakhine state has amplified nationalistic responses.

Since the 1960s, Myanmar’s ruling elites have governed their ethnically diverse society through the project of “Burmanization,” which is a policy – and arguably a violent strategy – to assimilate ethnic minorities into the majority’s culture (Burman), religion (Buddhism), and language (Burmese). Burmanization has long been the basis of Myanmar’s process of building its nation-state, and it continues to be embedded in the supposed democratization of Myanmar under State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. The government and military of Myanmar enjoys popular support from the local population regarding their treatment of the stateless Rohingyas. This is suggestive of the enduring influence of Burmese nationalists on defining the nation-state of Myanmar, and of the ethnicized nature of current democratization efforts in the country. But oftentimes, the nationalist ideology ends when actual political, economic and social interests begin.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her fellow state functionaries are apparently not nationalists when it comes to the neoliberalization of Myanmar’s economy and natural environment. Buddhist nationalists campaign for the denial of Myanmarese citizenship to the Rohingya Muslims because of their ethnic and religious interest in Burmanization. China and India support the Myanmar leadership and military on the Rohingya issue chiefly because of their investment, commercial, and security interests in the Rakhine state.

While nationalism in Asia particularly emphasizes state sovereignty and ethnicity, the current international order is based on the belief that all people are equal and human rights apply universally. Do nationalistic ideas undermine the idea of human rights?

Nationalistic ideas are not necessarily contradictory to the ideals of state sovereignty and human rights. The morality of the nationalist ideology depends on its intent and consequences in particular circumstances. Ho Chi Minh’s nationalist struggle for the independence and liberation of Vietnam was markedly different from the genocidal nationalism of Pol Pot in Cambodia. Nationalism in defense of state sovereignty and the right of people to self-determination is morally justified. But nationalism used as an excuse to violate the inherent rights and dignity of human beings deserves condemnation. World history is replete with tragic events showcasing how the name of human rights is used by imperial powers to destroy sovereign states, and how the principle of state sovereignty is abused to shield gross violations of human rights.

In 1999–2000, the UN-led INTERFET (International Force East Timor), a multinational peacekeeping force, intervened to stop the genocide of Timorese by the Indonesian government’s militias. This was a positive example of the protection of the universal principle of human rights in Southeast Asia. How binding are human rights in Asia today?

Interestingly, the “Asian Values” discourse has emerged as a major critique of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Its most vocal proponents have been Asia’s authoritarian leaders – from the late Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia in the 1990s to Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines recently. By arguing that the implementation of rights must be country-specific, they are basically attacking the foundational characteristics of the UDHR – that human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible and interdependent. While they have valid criticisms about the double standards of the United States and Europe on the practice of human rights, these do not justify any actions to renege on their obligations to human rights. Several Asian states had actively participated in the formulation of the UDHR. In fact, the UDHR had served as an initial guiding framework for many Asian countries in their decolonization, state formation, and nation-building processes. ■■■



# China's "Great Rejuvenation" and Its Young Nationalists

By Ye Yue

China's rapid economic rise and its growing political influence around the globe has made the Chinese leadership more self-confident in promoting Chinese values. Especially international organizations regularly get to feel China's wrath if they touch upon "Chinese sensitive" issue. It is pushing hard to make foreign companies comply with their sovereignty demands. Next to imposing sanctions the Chinese Communist Party can also rely on the support of a nationalistic youth that is eager to denounce, boycott or mobilize against critics.

On April 25, 2018, the Civil Aviation Administration of China issued a letter to 44 overseas airlines demanding immediate removal from their websites of all references to Taiwan, Macau and Hong Kong as separate countries, which it branded violations of its "One China" policy.

It was not the first time the Chinese government had pressed its sovereignty demands on foreign companies. On January 11, the China National Tourism Administration had issued a notice criticizing the Marriott hotel chain, which had listed Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Tibet as "countries" in a Chinese-language email questionnaire to rewards program members. The same day, the local Shanghai office of the Cyberspace Administration of China, the country's top internet regulator, ordered Marriott to suspend its Chinese-language website and mobile app, and gave the company one week to undergo a full "rectification."

The Chinese government's hope is that by pressing these demands it can firmly legitimize its claims to territorial sovereignty over these regions and force standardization of online maps. Given China's close integration

with global markets, this is no simple task – it requires that the government press every foreign company it can to validate assertions that rest on exceptionally complex histories and political entanglements. In the view of the Chinese government, the Republic of China (ROC) ceased to exist in 1949, and the islands of Taiwan are the sovereign territory of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Authorities in Taiwan understandably disagree, regarding themselves as the legitimate government of the ROC.

## A Shift in China's Foreign Policy Stance

China's demands, pressed across sectors, are impacting companies across the globe. Also in April, the Japanese retail company Muji was fined 200,000 yuan by the Shanghai Administration for Industry and Commerce because products it imported for its retail stores in China bore the stamp "Country of Origin: Taiwan." In the publishing sector, it emerged in August 2017 that Cambridge University Press had consented to demands to block access in China to around 300 articles and book reviews dealing with issues of sensitivity to the government, including Tibet, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the Tiananmen Square protest movement and the Cultural Revolution.

All of these cases underscore the growing assertiveness of China's foreign policy. In a break from the Deng Xiaoping-era policy of "concealing one's strength and biding one's time," President Xi Jinping has shown greater confidence, even hawkishness, since coming to office in 2012, and this confidence arises from a narrative of national strength. One of Xi's most frequently used phrases is the "Great

Rejuvenation of the Chinese People," the notion that the country must rise from its historic humiliation at the hands of the West and arrive once again at the center of the world stage. The rapid rise of China's economic fortunes, in stark contrast to continued news of economic weakness in Western countries, has given the Chinese government much greater confidence in what some call the "China Model," and greater willingness to promote the values of the Chinese Communist Party across the globe, with the ultimate purpose of consolidating the legitimacy of CCP rule. Western political woes have compounded this sense of confidence, with the vote for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump signaling to the Chinese government that the values of the West stand on unsteady foundations.

## Mobilization of Online Anger

But the Chinese government's global assertions of territorial and ideological sovereignty have also been supported by the voluntary mobilization of popular nationalism among Chinese youth, whose deeply felt emotions about their country are shaped by the positions of the Party in highly controlled media and education systems.

In November 2015, Taiwanese singer Chou Tzu-yu was shown clasping a Taiwanese flag during a television program in South Korea. The reaction from internet users in China was fast and fierce, accusing Chou of advocating Taiwanese independence. She was subjected to a Chinese boycott, her advertising deals and scheduled concerts in China canceled. The uproar did not settle down until she finally issued a video apology.

In a Taiwanese context, in fact, the flag of the ROC is understood to mean the opposite of Taiwanese independence. According to the "1992 Consensus," which remains controversial, China and Taiwan both agreed to the principle of an undivided China, but agreed to disagree on the political terms of this consensus. For many Taiwanese, this essentially means that support for the ROC equals support for unification. Young nationalists in China, however, demand that the people of Taiwan go beyond the consensus and respect the mainland political regime. For most Taiwanese, this is not just unfathomable – it goes against the Chinese Communist Party's own position in cross-straits relations.

In both the Chou Tzu-yu case of 2015 and a similar case in 2013 involving Taiwanese singer Deserts Chang, who posted a photo

of herself holding an ROC flag to the Weibo microblogging platform, the Chinese government kept its distance – suggesting that Chinese Communist Party officials themselves do not consider the ROC flag to be a symbol of Taiwanese independence.

For many youth in mainland China, the "1992 Consensus" is a relic of the distant past. They have been raised with the idea, propagated through state media, that "Taiwan has been the territory of China since ancient times." Lacking sufficient historical knowledge to understand that the ROC flag is not a symbol of independence, nationalistic youth are more radical than the Chinese government when it comes to the issue of sovereignty. Often referred to as the "Little Pinks," a name derived around 2010 from a popular literature website where many young internet users congregated, these nationalists train their fury on influential writers and celebrities they deem to be separatists, forcing public apologies.

In July 2016, Taiwanese actor Leon Dai was branded a separatist by the "Little Pinks" for voicing his support two years earlier for the Sunflower Movement, in which a coalition of students and other civil society actors opposed a trade agreement with China. Ultimately, the fury of the young nationalists could only be cooled by cutting Dai's scenes from a romantic film in which he played the male lead. Even the Chinese female lead, Zhao Wei, who also directed the film, was compelled by the furor to apologize through the film's official social media account. "We are all Chinese," she wrote, "and we resolutely uphold unification of the motherland, the national interest above all else."

## The Search for Youthful Propaganda

Highly sensitive, quick-tempered and energetic, the "Little Pink" cyber-nationalists are victorious in every engagement. They diligently set out to denounce those they suspect of separatism, and skillfully deploy memes and popular online phrases to politically mobilize other youth to attack those who are in their sights. Tactically, the efforts of the "Little Pinks" provide inspiration for official Party-run media, educating them in the importance of employing more youthful language in their political propaganda. Party media, such as the official social media accounts of the Chinese Communist Youth League and the *Global Times*, a tabloid newspaper published by the flagship *People's Daily* and dealing mostly with inter-

national affairs, often publish splashy attacks on so-called separatist voices, even encouraging and mobilizing the "Little Pinks" to join attacks on those tagged as enemies. Any voices of opposition in such cases conveniently fall victim to China's robust system of information censorship. Meanwhile, the nationalist youth are spurred on in their extremism by the acknowledgement they receive from Party media, and the apparent impunity they enjoy.

In the wake of the 2015 Chou Tzu-yu case, cyber-nationalists in China turned their sights beyond Chinese cyberspace, using virtual private networks to scale the country's Great Firewall and launch a "cross-strait memes war" on territorial sovereignty across the Facebook pages of prominent Taiwanese individuals and media, including the Facebook page of newly elected Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen. Both the *Global Times* and the Chinese Communist Youth League voiced their support for these actions. In successive cases involving the independence of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet, Party media have enjoyed the support of cyber-nationalists. Their perception is that the role of the Party media on this issue has shifted, from paying lip service and empty sermonizing to staunch nationalism.

The *Global Times* is China's most nationalistic newspaper, its headlines often stirring up emotions over Japan, the United States and Taiwan, spinning the facts to attack the "anti-China forces of the West." The nationalist tone has become a key selling point for the paper, whose objectives are as much commercial as political. As the news reading and discussion habits of Chinese have shifted to Weibo, WeChat and other social media apps, the *Global Times* has begun using simpler and more colloquial forms of writing to express its nationalistic views more clearly and directly, and as a result has thrived in the marketplace. As a marketing strategy, the nationalism purveyed by the *Global Times* also has the benefit of serving the broader interests of the Party, giving the paper a level of immunity from media controls. In part due to its commercial success, this shifting discourse has been emulated by other state media, including the official Weibo account of the *People's Daily*, and by commercial media subject to state controls.

## Imagining an Independence Agenda

Another nationalist controversy broke out in September 2017, after a student from mainland China destroyed pro-independence post-

ers appearing on a bulletin board managed by the student union at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In the midst of the ensuing debate, another mainland student dared to mock Chinese nationalism and was mercilessly criticized by the *Global Times* and the Chinese Communist Youth League. Hundreds of social media accounts in China mobilized young nationalists to attack the student by name. The mainland student repeatedly argued that he did not support Hong Kong independence, but merely rejected extreme Chinese nationalist sentiment, but the attacks continued.

Examples like this are now common. In January 2017, pop singer Hins Cheung came under fire for voicing his support for the 2014 Umbrella Movement. He was criticized in the *Global Times* and branded a secessionist by a newspaper published by China's Ministry of National Defense. But the instrumental role of cyber-nationalists was made clear in the official response: "This singer who called himself a 'patriot' on Weibo not only supported Hong Kong independence, but also publicly supported Taiwanese independence, and his two-faced double-dealing has met with online anger and resistance."

In the vast majority of cases, the notion of Hong Kong independence as an agenda has been manufactured by these cyber-nationalists, who urgently require a whip to stir up emotions and draw public attention. These cases have also led nationalist state media in China to recognize the effectiveness of the strategy. It was applied even in Macau during the September 2017 Legislative Assembly elections, as the *Global Times* played up the label "Macau separatist" to criticize certain candidates. Such accusations seem unfathomable in light of the fact that Macau has been a very compliant city with regards to the Chinese government, and there are no discernible interests advocating independence. The notion of Macau independence, in fact, is something one can only find in the pages of the *Global Times*.

## Zero Tolerance on Criticism of China

Separatism is the topic to which nationalist media and cyber-nationalists in China are most keenly attuned. But they have other declared enemies as well. Yang Shuping, a Chinese student at the University of Maryland, gave a graduation speech in May 2017 in which she praised America's clean air, and also the "fresh air of free speech." "Little Pinks"

personally attacked her for bad-mouthing China and worshipping the West. The criticism, which again spilled over into China's official media, prompted Yang to delete her Facebook page and issue an apology. For cyber-nationalists, any criticism of China is unacceptable, whether it deals with the political system, with society and daily life, with culture or with the environment – and criticism in the presence of foreigners is intolerable.

When Reyizha Alimjan, a Chinese actress from the Kazakh ethnic group known by the stage name "Rayza," posted a Lunar New Year message on Weibo in February 2018 saying that she missed home even though "I don't celebrate this holiday," she was roundly attacked for pandering to foreigners. Similarly, the international supermodel Liu Wen was panned by cyber-nationalists when she posted on Instagram – a service blocked inside China – and wished her fans a "Happy Lunar New Year" rather than a "Happy Chinese New Year."

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Another aspect of the young nationalist rejection of the blind worship of foreign things is the zealous hope that Chinese can ultimately prevail over foreigners. The tremendous box office success of *Wolf Warrior II*, a film in which a former Chinese special forces operative battles against a group of white mercenaries in Africa, emerging victorious while brandishing a PRC flag, deftly plucked at the strings of nationalist pride in China. Strong nationalist tones have crept into apparently unrelated incidents in recent months. In January this year, a group of Chinese tourists stranded at Toyko's Narita International Airport due to poor weather became angry at what they saw as unfair treatment from airline staff. During a scuffle with local police as tensions rose, the tourists started singing China's national anthem. Back in March, a Chinese student at Penn State University was recorded giving an impromptu singing performance at a gala dinner hosted by the Chinese Students & Scholars Association. One of the songs, "Father China," was a nationalist hymn to Chinese dominance, with the line: "One day we must make the Americans call us father."

China has not yet bid farewell to the social Darwinist logic that has prevailed since the Opium Wars of the 19th century. According to this logic, the strengthening of one nation can only be realized at the expense of another nation. The rapid growth of China's economy and the iron-fisted actions of the Chinese government have inspired young nationalists to new levels of self-confidence. But this confidence rests on fragile foundations. Now in the midst of a trade war with the United States, Party media in China are keen to moderate their propaganda strategy, mindful that China's projection of confidence has created unease in the West.

The extreme nationalist discourse epitomized by the *Global Times* has more recently been criticized by the Central Propaganda Department. Following the national anthem incident in Narita, the *People's Daily* warned against such excessive displays of nationalism: "Every Chinese citizen outside the country," the paper wrote, "is a calling card for the country's national image."

A hard nationalist stance cannot remain at the center of Chinese foreign policy indefinitely, and territorial sovereignty cannot eternally be a point of no compromise. When China's position of economic and political dominance wavers, the attitude of the Chinese government will change – and China's young cyber-nationalists will be deprived of their powerful patron. ■■■

# Rise of Right-Wing Populism in India

Richa Singh

On a solemn Eid day, barely 20 km away from the national capital, 15-year-old Junaid Khan was stabbed to death and his two brothers severely beaten up in a train by a mob. The crowd called them “beefeaters,” “Mulleys” [Muslims], “terrorists” and “traitors.” Their only crime – being Muslim, having beards and wearing skull caps. As Junaid’s bloodied body lay in the lap of his brother, who begged for help, the crowd watched on. Since 2014, there has been a surge of similar instances of mob brutality throughout India – in places such as Dadri, Jharkhand, Latehar, Una and Alwar.

When Narendra Modi led the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) to victory in 2014, ostensibly his campaign was about *vikas*, or development. Since then, however, headlines have been dominated by mob lynchings of Muslims, BJP’s preoccupation with the beef ban,<sup>1</sup> the rise of pro-Hindu private militia forces, and the relentless instrumentalization of nationalist sentiment through empty slogans such as “India First” and “New India.” Clearly populism is in the air.

Populism is not new to Indian politics, but while the left-wing variant has precedence, right-wing populism is new. The current populist wave emerged in a context replete with growing inequality, corruption scandals, and citizens’ rising rage against the political class. This new populism comes with some distinct features. First, having surfaced via the ballot box, central to its rise has been the political style of Prime Minister (PM) Modi – a Hindu hardliner with oratorical style, a penchant for inventing new ways of relating directly with the masses and emphasizing his “manly” leadership. Second, it shares close affinity with the

extreme right’s Hindu majoritarian view of the nation and conjures up a set of clearly identifiable ideological repertoire – of a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation), its enemies (the Muslims, to a lesser extent Christians and opponents) and the “macho” Hindu man to protect the vulnerable nation. Third, when it comes to economics, Modi’s populism differs from the standard populism of the right, which relies heavily on markets and the business class to steer economic progress. Instead, it combines pro-big business, pro-market elements (new bankruptcy laws, reform of indirect taxes) with people-oriented elements (bank accounts for the poor, modern toilets for all, cooking gas connection for the rural poor, farm loan waivers). Indeed, his sudden demonetization of 86 percent of the country’s currency was justified in terms of mass welfare, although it ended up hurting the poor. Therefore, populism in the contemporary era is not merely about ideology, but is a phenomenon where political style, ideology and identity politics meld and interact.

## Populist Style of PM Modi: Speech, Tweets and Personalization of Power

At the heart of the populist surge in India is Narendra Modi’s political style – a style that appeals to the masses while taking an anti-establishment/anti-elite stance and focusing on nativism. Throughout his campaign, Modi positioned himself as an *aam admi* (common man), an erstwhile *chaiwala* (tea vendor) in contrast to the elite, corrupt leadership of Congress. He declared that he was the *chowkidar* (watchman) of the state treasury against the looting Congress and accused the earlier

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Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of inaction by calling him “*Maun* (silent) Mohan Singh.” Simultaneously, he counterpoised Singh’s approach with his own “manly” leadership style – efficient, dynamic, potent, capable of removing all policy roadblocks through sheer force of personality, and able to strike hard at both external enemies (Pakistan and China) and internal threats (“Muslim terrorists”). Indeed, his 56-inch chest – able and willing to bear the harshest burdens in the service of “Mother India” – was frequently invoked during the election.

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Democracy is for Modi, and for most other populists,  
primarily about winning elections at any cost,  
by polarizing citizens along divisive lines of religion,  
caste, and class for political gains.

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After becoming prime minister, Modi evoked the slogan “I am new India,” presenting himself as the authentic representative of the people and an embodiment of the nation. Such a pretense is a dangerous one, placing the prime minister above any institution (including the judiciary), and disqualifying any opposition. As a result, NGOs, academics, artistes, students, opposition parties or anyone questioning Modi’s government have been branded as anti-people, anti-national, enemies, or agents of another country. What we have, thereby, is a deep personalization of power around Narendra Modi and rejection of pluralism. Democracy is for Modi, and for most other populists, primarily about winning elections at any cost, by polarizing citizens along divisive lines of religion, caste, and class for political gains; whipping up war rhetoric or suddenly demonetizing<sup>2</sup> 86 percent of a currency when 93 percent of the workforce is informal and cash-dependent.

But how does a populist leader connect with the masses? Here the role of communication is significant. The political style of Modi is highly media-dependent, relying heavily on various forms of mass media for dissemination. The PM is averse to the press (referred to disparagingly as “presstitutes” by his ministers) and instead prefers a direct communication style via radio and social media. An early adopter of social media, his management of and dominance of this medium has been a key factor in the construction of his political style, and of Modi as a populist leader. At one level, the PM has used monthly radio programs such as “*Mann Ki Baat*” (heart talk), social media, holograms, and public speeches to establish an unmediated connect with his people

and to delegitimize his opponents, evident in slogans such as “I am Hindu Nationalist”; “Recovery of black money and redistributing 15 lakhs of rupees to each citizen”; “India First, an all-inclusive nation”; “Sickular. Vote bank politics” (a cynical reference to Congress and other parties that used secularism for votes only). At another level, cyberspace has come to be policed by BJP’s well-organized cyber-wing/Modi *Bhakts*<sup>3</sup> (faithful ones) who systematically attempt to silence criticism of the government in cyberspace, threatening and abusing opponents – calling them “libertards” (Liberal retards); commies, *sepoys*, and *Macaulay putra* (the last two meaning mental slaves of the West) and demanding that they go to another country. In doing so, they create constant simplified binary conflicts of “us” versus “them,” ordinary Hindu people versus their enemies – Muslims, Christians, the pro-minority intelligentsia/English-speaking liberal elites.

## The Specter of Hindu Rashtra and Its Enemies

Another distinct feature of this phase has been an aggressive revival of *hindutva* (Hindu fundamentalism)<sup>4</sup> in the social and political spheres, posing a double threat to India’s secular democracy. With the BJP in power, its mother organization, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and another affiliated organization called Sangh Parivar have grown assertive in the civil society domain, mobilizing society along communal lines, indulging in acts of violence and intimidation against minority Muslims and Christians as well as against those who oppose them. In the political sphere, the BJP is working from the domain of the government to provide overt and covert support to RSS/*Sangh* activities, changing heads of public and educational institutions across the country to bring them under RSS influence, ordering the rewriting of history text books to suit RSS’s communal historiography, and suggesting changes in the country’s constitution to dilute its secular nature. The attempt is to radically transform the socio-political discourse in India by challenging secularism, notions of minority rights, equality, and change the nature of the Indian republic – away from a secular, plural, democratic republic as enshrined in the constitution, to a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nationhood) of the right-wing imagination. Such a state is conceived as a non-egalitarian Hindu hegemonic state that would include as its citizens only

those who racially and culturally belong to the Hindu religion, and reduce other religious minorities to second-class citizens.

In this given context, two campaigns carried out by *hindutva* forces are significant, highlighting the larger implication that right-wing populism has for gender, minority rights and democracy. One is an aggressive campaign against interfaith marriage carried out by Dharam Jagran Manch (Faith Awakening Forum, an affiliate of RSS). In what they term “Love Jihad,” they allege that Muslim and Christian youth are converting young Hindu girls by enticing and tricking them into marriage. Love marriage, particularly those across religious and caste lines, still arouse deep discomfort among large sections in India. Combined with the propaganda of alleged conversions, the campaign became a potent mix of patriarchy and communalism. It began to target not just Muslim and Christian men married to Hindu women, but also the women themselves, whom they sought to forcibly restore to the Hindu fold through the use of violence, intimidation, emotional blackmail, duplicity, and drugs. Muslim (and Christian) men were portrayed as treacherous outsiders – the enemy “other” who were out to annihilate the Hindu nation through the bodies of its women. By raising fear and passion over a perceived threat to Hindu women and the nation, the campaign sought to systematically whip up hostilities along communal lines in the social sphere. The second campaign was launched by the Dharam Jagran Manch and RSS-affiliated groups to convert Christians and Muslims to Hinduism, a process they called *Ghar Wapsi*, or homecoming, claiming that every Indian is a Hindu, and Christians and Muslims are those who have strayed or been brought over by missionaries. The *Ghar Wapsi* campaigns have been going on and off across India, forcibly converting a large number of minorities to Hinduism. Both these campaigns have led to a growing atmosphere of intolerance, insecurity among minorities and simmering communal tensions. Despite the fact that both violate the letter and spirit of the Indian constitution, which guarantees the justiciable right to “profess, practice and propagate ones religion,” and are against laws such as the Special Marriage Act of 1954 (which recognizes marriages between girls over 18 and boys over 21, regardless of religion and caste), the government has made no efforts to stop these activities. On the contrary, these hate campaigns have received support from within the government, as a number of BJP members of parliament and ministers have lent support

and indulged in hate speech within Parliament, while the prime minister maintained a stony silence despite protests from intellectuals and other civil society activists.

Notably, while the impact of *hindutva* on minorities is clear, the impact on gender issues is more complex. At one level, as illustrated above, gender is implicit in the construction of the Hindu nation by *hindutva* groups, who typically in the name of honor impose restrictions on Hindu women and girls, or occasionally demand that Hindu women produce more babies. Interestingly, this anti-women stance has elicited strong condemnation from women across sections, including the BJP. The BJP itself has a number of articulate women leaders and ministers who often assert progressive gender roles. However, their views remain reactionary on questions of religion and minority rights, as they support Hindu supremacy. Similarly, when it comes to the *hindutva* project, there are as many women who oppose it as there are who support it, and even some who participate in *hindutva* activities – including instances of direct involvement in violence against Muslims. Sadhvi Pragya Thakur, accused in the Malegaon Terror blast (2008), is merely one such high-profile case among many. While paucity of research on gender and Hindu right-wing populism in the contemporary phase makes it difficult to generalize, these instances nevertheless raise important questions about the place of gender in Hindu religious extremism, and dismantle the popular notion that politically involved women are always inspired by pacifism, equality, and justice.

Clearly Indian democracy today stands at a critical juncture. While majoritarianism of the worst kind is creeping in, it is not going uncontested; senior judges of the Supreme Court, journalists, writers, artists, academic, large sections of progressive and secular civil society organizations; campaigns such as “Not In My Name” are voicing their opposition. Growing opposition to government is also evident as farmers and students take to the street. However, as the country heads toward the 2019 general election, whether the disparate leaders in the opposition parties are able to rise to the occasion to challenge Modi’s disruptive politics and offer a better alternative before the general elections will play a critical role. ■■■

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<sup>1</sup> A cow is considered a sacred animal by Hindus.

<sup>2</sup> At a time when the BJP was going to polls in a crucial state of Uttar Pradesh on November 8, 2016, Prime Minister Modi sprung a surprise, declaring overnight demonetization of two high-value banknotes that sucked out Rs 15.5 lakh crore in value from the banking system. There were long delays in replacing the notes. Given that much of India's economy is cash-dependent and informal, such a move caused tremendous hardship, particularly for poor Indians, and also negatively impacted the economy.

<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Modi, despite criticism, continues to follow on twitter a number of "trolls" who abuse and threaten critics.

<sup>4</sup> The rise of the extreme right is not new. In the 1990s, the Sangh had successfully communalized Indian politics, and their project of *hindutva* amplified BJP's growth from a fringe party with merely two members in Parliament to a mainstream party. This project led to the killing of thousands of people in sectarian violence, culminating in the pogrom against the Muslim community in Gujarat in 2002 (where Narendra Modi was then the Chief Minister). In the decade that followed, *hindutva* had lost its sheen, overshadowed by other socio-economic and political dynamics.

# Exploiting Resentments, Eroding Institutions: Populism in the Philippines and Southeast Asia

Cleo Calimbahin

There has been an increasing number of populist leaders in the region. Often the populist strategy exploits the resentment of the people in the system and institutions that fail to deliver and address their needs. But in voting for populist leaders, there is the vulnerability that democratic institutions can be further weakened or used to promote the populist agenda.

Last March 6, 2018, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte addressed a crowd at the Malacanang Palace during the oath ceremony for the newly formed Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission, a commission tasked to hold public officials accountable for their actions. With his usual fire, flair and foul words, Duterte said, “You cannot acquire jurisdiction over me, not in a million years.”<sup>1</sup> Referring to the International Criminal Court (ICC), Duterte was adamant that his actions and the performance of his administration was not the business of any international organization or any international treaty. Along with the United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR), the ICC had been sending communications to the Philippines criticizing the excessive use of force and the violent nature of the government’s anti-drug campaign. For Duterte, the bloody nature of the drug campaign is an electoral promise he is determined to fulfill. After one week, the Philippines announced that it was withdrawing from the ratified Rome Statute, the treaty that created the International Criminal Court (ICC). Hints and threats of withdrawal from the ICC had been increasing, along with personal attacks against the UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard. When it comes to international organizations, international NGOs and human rights groups,

the populist leader has created a narrative of ill-informed foreigners meddling in domestic affairs. More importantly, they were getting in the way of him fulfilling his duty. As early as the 2016 election campaigns, Duterte managed to paint the Philippine drug crisis and subsequently his administration’s drug war as a matter of national interest. Duterte dissuaded the Philippine National Police from cooperating with a possible UN human rights investigation, saying, “Why would we be answering? *Sino sila* [Who are they]? And who are you to interfere in the way I would run my country? You know very well that we are being swallowed by drugs.”<sup>2</sup>

It should not come as a surprise that Duterte would challenge the ICC or the OHCHR. Prior to this, Duterte was already combative against the Philippines’ Commission on Human Rights. For a time, the Chairman of the Commission, Jose Luis Gascon, was called names and publicly berated. In support of the president, allies in Congress threatened the Commission with a \$20 budget.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the Human Rights Commission, other institutions have also been shamed and blamed using populist rhetoric. Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno of the Supreme Court was removed from her post as top magistrate through a quo warranto petition filed by the Solicitor General. Furthermore, the Office of the Ombudsman, the Philippines’ constitutionally mandated anti-corruption body, clashed with the president over an investigation of his alleged bank transactions that amounted to 1 billion pesos (US\$19 million).<sup>4</sup> The chief executive issued a 90-day suspension against then Deputy Ombudsman Melchor Carandang for “divulging valuable information of a confidential character acquired by his office or by him on account of his position.”<sup>5</sup>

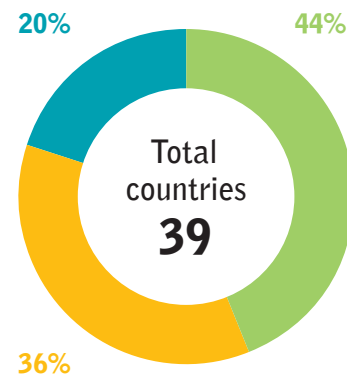
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**Asia-Pacific: Status by population****Total population: 4.06 billion**Source: Freedom House Report 2017 ■ Not Free ■ Partly Free ■ Free

These kinds of interactions and statements weaken institutions meant to safeguard the rule of law and provide avenues of checks and balances. Apart from these political institutions, the media and civil society have also been on the receiving end of punitive action and intimidation. The Security and Exchange Commission revoked the incorporation of online media platform Rappler for violating laws that prohibit foreign ownership of media firms.<sup>6</sup> Recently, the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency announced that it will investigate human rights groups in case they have links with drug lords and the illegal drug trade, suggesting that these groups are being used to discredit government efforts in the anti-drug campaign.<sup>7</sup> The intolerance and the unpredictability of populist regimes weakens democratic institutions over time. Can institutions weather the populist agenda?

## The Expanding Influence of Populist Rhetoric

In recent years, voters have increasingly chosen populist leaders from the left and from the right. A growing number of elected populist leaders can be found in countries with long democratic traditions and history. It might be less surprising to find populist leaders in countries that are purportedly democratic but lacking strong liberal democratic traditions. Some have argued that the reason for this rise is the failure of globalization and the lack of inclusive growth. For the segment of the population that has not benefited from the borderless economy, there is, understandably, a cynicism that makes populist rhetoric appealing. While that may be true, in the case of the Philippines, manifestations of populism can be attributed to weak institutions and a democratic deficit,

**Asia-Pacific: Status by country**

rendering democratic institutions incapable of addressing public demands. One reason for this is due to the primacy of personalities over institutionalized political parties. The irony is that democratic deficits create an opening for populists that further strengthens the tendency for personalities to dominate over parties. In time, institutions will further weaken under a populist regime. For some political scientists, this will include electoral integrity, but the fact that populists managed to win these election means that electoral integrity was flawed to begin with. The electoral process provides an opportunity for populist leaders, who can likewise be traditional politicians and need not be pro-poor, to have favorable electoral outcomes. A critical look at the electoral process with an eye to minimizing its vulnerabilities should be part of the long-term agenda of reformists.

## Southeast Asia: Variations of Populism and Nationalism

The Philippines is not alone in the region in experiencing the leadership of a populist. Southeast Asia has always struggled with strongman rule. The recent Freedom House Report of 2017 shows that a “number of repressive rulers in Asia reined in free speech and assembly during 2016 to smother public criticism of their own crimes and abuses.”<sup>8</sup> Freedom House research classifies 44 percent of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region as free, 36 percent as partly free, and 20 percent as not free. Manifestations of populist and strong-arm rule vary from authoritarian populism to religious nationalism. A similarity in strategy among populists is in the use of “crisis” and “performance.” By using a “vocabulary of fear, crisis and danger” and a promise of agency for the marginalized, the populist gives an image of



quick response and action.<sup>9</sup> In the weeks leading up to the 31st ASEAN Summit in October 2017, Philippine President Rodrigo R. Duterte stated in a press conference during an official foreign trip that ASEAN countries should try to improve its “cohesive partnership” and to stay relevant with the needs of the times. Weeks before the summit, the most recent Global Impunity Index was released, ranking the Philippines as the worst among all countries surveyed. Additionally, the Philippines’ ranking in the rule of law is expected to continue its downward spiral. Yet, President Duterte was confident that there would be no discussion during the ASEAN summit regarding his administration’s campaign against drugs, and instead expected support from other ASEAN leaders. Together, ASEAN’s 10 member states of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, represent the third-largest market in the world. Combined, the region provides the third third-largest source in the world. The profile of the region’s population is both young and a force for a consumer-driven economy. Just 20 years ago, with the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the region suffered an economic setback that seemed insurmountable, requiring financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), especially for Indonesia and Thailand. The region’s resiliency has ushered in years of relative stability and economic growth. Yet Southeast Asia continues to struggle with governance issues, corruption, human rights, gender equality, religious and ethnic conflict, and collusion of economic and political elites.

Two of the first heads of state to arrive in the Philippines for the ASEAN Summit was Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia and State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi of Myanmar. They were welcomed by former President and close Duterte ally Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who is now serving as a Congresswoman after the dismissal of her plunder cases. The ASEAN member states are led by an assortment of political players that reflect the region’s challenges, domestic democratic deficits and political dysfunction. Prime Minister Hun Sen is one of the longest serving heads of state in the region. His government recently kept the opposition party Cambodia National Rescue Party from participating in elections through a Supreme Court ruling. The repressive style of Hun Sen and the maverick Duterte have drawn the two ASEAN leaders closer together. Given the Philippines’ sudden pivot to China, both countries have become allies of China and of one another. Both Duterte and Hun Sen are known to get along and Hun

Sen has praised the Philippines’ tough stance on illegal drugs. Myanmar’s Aung Sang Suu Kyi had it easy as well in the last ASEAN summit, because no country brought up how her government was responding to the religious nationalism issue involving the displacement and deaths of Rohingyas.

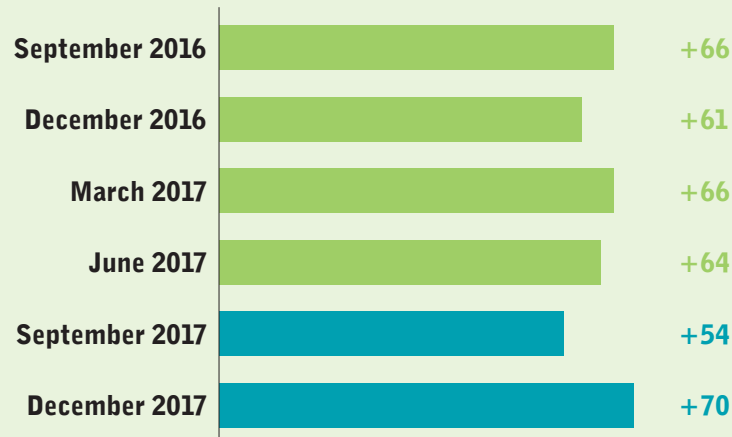
## Indonesia: A Country with a History of Strongman Rule but Also a Strong Civil Society Able to Oust a Dictator

In the 2015 elections, voter preference almost tilted in favor of Prabowo Subianto, the son-in-law of President Suharto. Formerly the commanding officer of the Kopassus and Kostrad, Prabowo’s units cracked down hard on the opposition during the dictatorship. Winning with a slim margin, current President Jokowi is no dictator, but has been labeled as a “polite populist.”<sup>10</sup> Today, there is a strand of religious nationalism making populist claims that is gaining ground in Indonesia. It successfully ousted Jakarta Governor Ahok on grounds of blasphemy. Moreover, the harsh crackdown on members of the LGBT community is worrisome for human rights advocates. Recently, Jokowi appointed a moderate Muslim scholar alongside Megawati Soekarnoputri to head the presidential unit created to safeguard the PANCASILA principles, Indonesia’s state ideology. In the upcoming 2019 elections, there is a possibility of another Jokowi-Prabowo rivalry for the presidency. Jokowi in looking to run with Ma’aruf Amin, who heads one of the largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), is aware that the challenge of Prabowo remains strong. By seeking not just an endorsement but an alliance with NU shows a mobilization of religion for electoral and post-election support. In the cases of Cambodia, Myanmar and Indonesia, crises or threats are framed to justify and legitimize populist actions and policies to preserve the power of political elites and invariably weaken institutions along the way.

## The Philippines: One of the Oldest Democracies in Southeast Asia

The Philippines is one of the oldest democracies in Asia, with much experience in elections and the formation of democratic institutions.

### Net satisfaction with Duterte administration



Source: Social Weather Station as published in Philippine Star

As a former colonial state of the United States, it is tempting to suggest that the Philippines mimics the United States. But that might not be an accurate description of the democratic challenges both countries are facing. The Philippines after all, endured 20 years of Marcos dictatorship. In addition, while many compare Rodrigo Duterte to Donald Trump in the way they use unfiltered language, have a solid base of support and an unpredictable attitude toward democratic institutions, the Philippines elected a populist leader ahead of its former colonizer. It might be more accurate to say that we mirror the United States in some aspects. This would not be all too surprising, given that colonial legacies tend to linger with unintended and pervasive consequences. The democratic deficit in the Philippines can be traced back to the political structures and enduring effects of elite accommodation that began under the colonial state apparatus.

The Philippines is one of the fastest growing economies in Asia, with “uninterrupted

growth for 74 consecutive quarters.”<sup>11</sup> While it continues to lag in infrastructure, there is a sense that the country is finally playing catch-up to its neighbors as far as economic development is concerned. These gains, including the improved lives of its citizens, need to be protected. The controversial and not so conventional Philippine president has been under fire from human rights advocates for his administration’s war on drugs. Since the campaign to wage war against the drug trade was launched, there has been an increasing number of extrajudicial killings, especially in urban poor communities. Those killed in anti-drug police operations are said to have fought back, leaving law enforcers no choice but to shoot them. In a survey by the Social Weather Station, more than 50 percent of those polled believe that the deaths from the war on drugs did not fight back as the police claim, and 60 percent of the respondents think that the victims and targets are the poor. The strongarm tactics of President Duterte in the drug war has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings, yet he remains popular and approval ratings remain high. One question that does come up is, where is the vibrant civil society in the Philippines? What are their strategies to encourage participation?

The populist trend is unlikely to wane soon, neither in the Philippines nor the region, given the politics of resentment and the constant fanning of anxiety to create a sense of crisis. There is a need to listen more carefully to the needs of the people and work toward addressing them, especially if it concerns basic needs. However, there is a need to look at the long-term impact of the populist agenda and how it is weakening democratic institutions, especially the values of human rights and the primacy of the rule of law. ■■■

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<sup>4</sup> Using March 2018 currency rates, this is US\$19 million.

<sup>5</sup> Ranada, P. (2018, January 29). Malacañang suspends Deputy Ombudsman Carandang. *Rappler*. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/nation/194721-malacanang-suspends-overall-deputy-ombudsman-arthur-carandang>

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<sup>7</sup> Corrales, N. (2018, March 27). PDEA, PNP probing links between rights groups, drug lords. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/978493/breaking-news-pdea-pnp-drugs-drug-lords-human-rights-groups-destabilization-derrick-carreon>

<sup>8</sup> Freedom House Report 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Curato, N. (2016). Politics of anxiety, politics of hope: Penal populism and Duterte’s rise to power. *Journal of Contemporary Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35 (3), pp. 91–109.

<sup>10</sup> Mietzner, M. (2014, April–June). The Rise of a Polite Populist. *Inside Indonesia*. Retrieved from <http://www.insideindonesia.org/jokowi-rise-of-a-polite-populist>

<sup>11</sup> Central Bank Governor Nestor Espenilla in a speech for the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, October 18, 2017.

# “Anything Goes” Populism: Holding on to Power in Myanmar

Khin Zaw Win

Myanmar is locked in yet another Rohingya crisis, one that is far more serious this time. Besides heavy and poorly thought-out military action, a racist, authoritarian populism is being directed against Muslim minorities, notably the Rohingya, in order to prop up a visionless regime. The careful building of a common national identity could stop this destructive policy and maybe even lead to peace.

There is a popular Burmese song with the refrain, “brave and Buddhist national country”; we used to hum it in our childhood. However, as the years passed and the situation regressed on multiple fronts, I came to realize the danger inherent in the sentiments expressed in that catchy song. (It is still being played today.) Myanmar is neither wholly Buddhist nor wholly Bamar (Burman), and therein lies the root of the 70-year-old conflict. The song may have been useful (as nationalism had been) in the struggle against British colonial rule, but had that struggle been for a Bamar Buddhist nation? The answer to that question still divides the country today, even more acutely than it did in 1948. The real tragedy here is that one ethnic group sees itself as the one true embodiment of Myanmar and that all the other ethnicities and minorities must conform to it. At various times throughout its history, the political and administrative entity referred to as Burma/Myanmar was assumed to be a single state. Most people involved in politics and governance in Myanmar would also accept that it is a nation-state; however, a measure of circumspection is called for in using those terms in a meaningful sense. Myanmar still falls short of becoming a nation, and the purported state is a weak one. The troubles that the country is beset with – including those

related to democracy – can be said to stem from this.

Most states in East and Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, are multi-ethnic, marked by conflict and internal colonialism. States have attempted to force ethnic assimilation and unity through a common language, immigration and by employing military force in response to movements for autonomy. Nationalism in this broad region is seen less as an aggressive, externally oriented ideology, but rather as an engine for domestic functions. This includes an integrative nationalism aiming to further state- and nation-building, and a modernizational nationalism, designed to mobilize people in the interest of the shared, “solidarity” goal of modernization. Myanmar’s present acute situation is a reflection of the failure of both functions. With the character of nation-building strongly related to the capacity of a state, Myanmar does not fare well by either measure.

There are few better places to start a discussion on nationalism than with the writings of the late Benedict Anderson. Contrary to some perceptions, he was not entirely against nationalism and had expressed the positive sides of it as well. The core problem with nationalism in Myanmar is that it zeroes in on a single, self-defined and exclusive construct at the expense of others in a deeply multi-ethnic country. Three years ago, I wrote a conference paper titled “Time for Myanmar to Grow Out of its Nationalisms” (note the plural). In it I stated:

*Myanmar can be described as a land of many nationalisms with no nation. Sixty-seven years after independence, nation-making has not only stalled, it has even regressed. There is a long list of countries*

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*that had been mapped into existence by colonial powers and eventually became independent states. Their postcolonial record in building states and nations has been patchy, and there is voluminous literature on the whys and wherefores. Myanmar is in the category that has fared poorly. The most glaring testament to this lies in the longest-running civil war in the world – beginning a bare three months after independence in 1948 and stretching up to the present day. In the early decades, this conflict was partly fueled by ideology and was partly ethnic-based. Following the collapse of the Burma Communist Party in 1989, it has become solely an ethnic-oriented war, with religious overtones. No matter what some scholars say, economic motivations are of much lesser import in this conflict.*

*That nationalisms play an important – even pivotal – part in all this is widely accepted. The question now is how to bring an end to the lethal side-effects of nationalism without taking it out of the equation or pillorying it. Following the revival of a democratic system in 2010, there has been a resurgence of some forms of Buddhist nationalism. Then there is the imminent introduction of a federal system, with a panoply of ethno-nationalisms feeding into and growing out of it.*

In the three years since then, ethnic identities and ethno-nationalisms have become more assertive and conflictive. As if the ethnic dimension was not bad enough, the Buddhist overlay is making the situation much worse. Firebrand extremist monks deliver what may be called hate sermons directed against

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minorities. In an attempt to rein in those hate-mongering monks, the state – inadvertently or not – sometimes steps in and further muddies the picture. Recently, a government notification prohibited the use of Buddhist terms in the ordination of Anglican priests.

In the period leading up to the World War II, Bamar nationalist movements emulated their counterparts in Europe (especially Germany and Italy), particularly in their militancy. In those years, too, resentment did not stem so much from economic factors as they did from anti-colonial and anti-immigrant

sentiments. The ease and efficacy with which politicians could agitate nationalist sentiment was a common feature in Europe and Burma/Myanmar.

## The Costly Revival of (Electoral) Democracy

Following half a century of dictatorship and isolation, there is now a resurgence of Buddhist-tinged nationalism and majoritarianism exuding intolerance of minorities. “Democratic” politics is engrossed with pandering to populism and winning the next election. In the past, it was a matter of the military dictatorship ruling over the people. The reintroduction of a democratic system has meant that power based on the gun is replaced by power based on numbers. This has involved relegating religious and ethnic minorities to a lower status and characterizing them as a threat that must be persecuted. Looked at this way, the treatment of the Rohingyas, the other Muslims and ethnic minorities becomes very clear. The building of a “democracy” by majority rule exacts a price on minorities, and heavy one at that.

This is an era of electoral politics, with an electorate emerging from decades of dictatorship. Populism holds sway and beyond garnering votes, parties and politicians have little regard for public opinion. There seems to be little thought as to the direction in which the country is going, or needs to go. Civil society is not strong or big enough; it is divided and mostly involved in niche issues. The crony private sector is flourishing and going from strength to strength, keeping to its rentier, extractive and exclusive ways. On top of it all, these stakeholders are disconnected and inward-looking. One donor asked how a democracy can be built if people do not talk to each other. In other words, Myanmar seems to be losing its way. After expending much time and suffering, a semi-democracy has been gained. But beyond this, there is neither road nor chart.

The final word on Buddhism – the Myanmar Theravada school to be precise – is that there will have to be an internal rethink of its rigidity, insularity and intolerance. This is not a new process as Buddhist schools have evolved over the centuries. A serious comparative study of the other schools and traditions within Buddhism should not be unacceptable. In one of my earlier essays about nationalism, I warned:

*To enlarge upon and elaborate further (and add to the sense of acuteness), the present*



*new state and polity have shown neither the strength, commitment nor inclination to address the consequences adequately. The ongoing Rohingya crisis is an enduring case in point. Bamar (Burman) nationalism appears to be a sacrosanct ideology that no one dares to touch. Indeed, some “leaders” would be more likely to exploit it. More than that, no one seems to care much about the consequences of keeping an unmodified ideology beyond its shelf life. The fact that the country continues to bear the burden of past folly and arrogance in fanning the flames appears to be missed. We have to think of what more lies in store for Myanmar then.*

What emerged after August 2017 in Rakhine state is a terrible fulfillment.<sup>1</sup>

## The Race to Employ Populism

Having abandoned ideology, it was more or less preordained that the National League for Democracy (NLD)/government and the military would resort to populism. The intellectual dimension is missing for anything more than that. In addition, the lack of managerial capacity makes it difficult to run even a bureaucratic state, much less a developmental one. But as useful as it may be in winning elections, populism is completely irrelevant in sustaining an effective government. Two years into its term in office, the NLD government still does not have an economic policy to speak of. The former Thaksin Shinwatra government in neighboring Thailand, on the other hand, has been derided by critics as being populist, but it was able to bring health care to rural areas at a minimal cost. The populism that is currently being utilized in Myanmar is of the opposite, negative kind. But how long can such a strong hatred of the “other” last? With communications technology, a freer media, and contrarian civil society, the purveyors in power have to realize that theirs is not a forever game. After five decades of junta or one-party rule, there is now a multi-party system. However, two-thirds of the 93 parties registered are ethnic-based parties, and almost exclusively of a single ethnicity. Twenty-three political parties won seats in the bicameral parliament, but the picture is dominated by just two parties – the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party and the NLD. With ideological decline, rudimentary election campaign platforms and minimal policy debate, the stage was set for a recourse to populism. Besides the Myanmar

public’s widespread rejection of the military government, populism played a large part in the NLD’s electoral successes. To fan this populism, or to deploy parallel brands of it, use was made of what has been called nationalism.

Domestically, both the ruling NLD government and the military have tasted the flavor of increased public support. What really counts for them is not the racist overtones, but the votes that it can bring in the next election. Myanmar’s ethnic diversity sits uneasily with a Bamar Buddhist majority that is increasingly chauvinistic and intolerant. With an antiquated first-past-the-post electoral system, the politicians and generals know very well that if you have the ethnic and religious majority sewn up, you do not have to bother much about the minorities.

But with Myanmar’s added predicament of a 70-year-old civil armed conflict, electoral victories do not assure the return of peace. Relying upon majoritarian politics and mono-ethnic nationalism can actually deter a peace settlement with the ethnic nationalities and by extension, the hoped-for federal system. True,

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the current hard-edged racism is directed against the hapless Rohingya and secondly against Muslims in general, but it is delusional to expect that this unfettered racism will stop there. It should be noted here that most indigenous ethnic organizations are largely silent on the ongoing crisis.

The capital Naypyidaw and the armed forces are already being regarded as entrenched Bamar Buddhist strongholds. For those who are comfortable with this, the downside is that other ethnic nationalisms shall become stronger too, more assertive, and opposed by reaction to the majority wave. The ultimate result will not be an integrated nation, but a balance of ethnic nationalisms, most likely at odds with one another.

## Myanmar Needs a National Identity

Despite the disillusionment and despair, there is still hope. But political leaders will have to value capability over blind loyalty, and sincere concern for the country over staying in power. A thriving “peace industry” well-funded by donors has sprung up since 2011. There is no



doubt that much effort has been expended, but there is little to show for it. The much lauded peace process has more or less stalled, and bitter fighting continues. To get out from being bogged down and to start thinking out of the box, I would suggest setting a common national identity as the goal instead of peace. This is not to downgrade peace, but an attempt to achieve it through the common effort of building a national identity. It should be a collective, inclusive and plural process, where all the aforesaid ethno-nationalisms can be heard and hopefully integrated. Such a process is needed to counter the debilitating and destructive populisms that lead to nowhere. ■■■

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<sup>1</sup> On August 25, 2017, there had been fresh attacks and the situation blew up again. Security personnel as well as civilians were killed, and the military unleashed a campaign of terror against the “non-indigenous” population of north Rakhine state: 5,000–6,000 Rohingya are estimated to have been killed and 700,000 driven out into Bangladesh. This was accompanied by horrible atrocities against men, women and children.

# Beyond Nationalism: Finding Common Ground in Cambodian Communities

Raymond Hyma and Suyheang Kry

This article reflects upon Khmer nationalism and considers the historical context for viewing Vietnamese people as the *Other*. It highlights contemporary community perspectives around ongoing challenges as well as the potential prospects recently uncovered through an action research study. Finally, it explores existing “connectors” and positive relations in mixed communities that go beyond nationalism and show Cambodian unity in spite of ethnic differences.

**Stop! Don't pour that water into my glass.**

**Why?**

**It was on the table of those Yuon who just left this restaurant. They were using the same container to pour water into their cups.**

**OH! So, what? It's clean. They didn't even drink from this container.**

**Well, they were Yuon! You know from Vietnam! Don't you get it?**

**Get what? You know them personally or something?**

**Um... not personally but...**

**But what? What is the problem with drinking this water?**

**I just don't want anything to do with them.**

**Why?**

**I just feel so uncomfortable. All Yuon people are bad. They stole our land and brought lots of their families to live here illegally. They are going to take us Khmer over...**

This conversation overheard between a young Chinese-Cambodian man and a girl during some action research fieldwork in 2017 provides some rare insight into everyday perceptions that affect day-to-day lives in Cambodian communities. Such a nationalistic worldview is based on ethnic factors, mixed with feelings of fear. The fear of losing one's national identity can be stoked by victimization based on historical grievances and other ongoing issues between “us” and “them.” Yet, it is particularly interesting that the young man who openly showed hostile feelings toward ethnic Vietnamese people was himself an ethnic Chinese, rather than a “pure” Khmer. This small example reflects the larger aspect of a nation as an imagined political community, where people may not know each other, but are connected through a sense of belonging. Nationalism, therefore, tends to take root in movements aiming to preserve a national identity comprised of a cohesive group with a distinctive tradition, culture, religion, language, and above all, sovereignty.

For some historians, Cambodian nationalism, more commonly known as Khmer nationalism, established itself over two centuries ago in response to the rise of neighboring countries (Thailand and Vietnam) and French colonization. The current form exhibits, among others, a particular antipathy for Vietnam.

## Tracking the Roots of Khmer Nationalism vis-à-vis the Vietnamese

Like other forms of nationalism throughout the world, Khmer nationalism, rooted in seeing Vietnamese people as *the Other*, can be

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traced back to events that took place centuries ago, when a rise of cultural and national consciousness to protect the very survival of Khmer identity was spearheaded by top-down elites. Such nationalistic sentiment has been sustained by ongoing historical grievances and the perception that powerful neighboring countries pose a threat to the existence of Khmer sovereignty, culture, religion, language, social/political structures, and anything else that characterizes Khmer identity. Hostility, violence, and distrust were omnipresent throughout the history of Cambodia-Vietnam relations, with the Vietnamese commonly being referred to as an enemy and invader.

Once the glory and pride of the Angkor Era declined, Cambodia saw itself sandwiched between its powerful neighboring countries, particularly during the 17th century. To counter Thailand's aggression, the Cambodian King turned to Vietnam for support and cemented their alliance through intermarriage with a Vietnamese princess. The resulting agreement to allow the Vietnamese to set up a settlement in the southeastern part of then-Khmer territory, Prey Nokor (present day Ho Chi Minh City), is now seen by

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many Khmer as the beginning of an aggressive expansionist invasion and loss of Khmer land. The repressive policies under Vietnamese control over Cambodia in the early 1800s continued to threaten the Khmer elite, putting the very survival of the Kingdom, Buddhism, existing social structures, and even Khmer culture itself, into question. Khmer-led revolts began to take place.

The influx of Vietnamese people into Cambodia during the French colonial period (1863–1953) further stoked resentment among the Khmer, as the Vietnamese often took posts in the protectorate's governing leadership. This further worsened ethnic friction and was seen as a divide-and-rule strategy perpetrated by the French. Moreover, grievances arose when the French colonizers decided to formally turn over the territory of Cochinchina, or the Lower Mekong Delta (known to Cambodia as Kampuchea Krom), to Vietnam in 1949. This loss further fed a strong nationalist sentiment that continues

to this day. The legacy of the minority Khmer Krom residing in modern Vietnam continues to be an influential dynamic in contemporary Cambodian-Vietnamese relations.

The national political scene and broader geopolitical landscape of the 1960s continued to widen the ethnic divide and ongoing resentment between the Khmer and Vietnamese. With over 450,000 Vietnamese living in Cambodia by 1970, a sense of urgency swept the public, leading to targeted attacks. More than 4,000 ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia were massacred and nearly 250,000 repatriated to Vietnam following the overthrow of the monarchy and the five-year descent into civil war. The infamous Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) that caused the death of over one third of the population is sometimes viewed as a socialist nationalist movement to “purify” Khmer of foreign invasion, especially in regard to the Vietnamese. An estimated 20,000 ethnic Vietnamese are believed to have been purged during that period.

The post-Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia brought a new wave of Vietnamese residents during the transitional government. The influx reminded some of the past. Cold War dynamics added to the rising level of deeply-rooted anti-Vietnamese nationalism in the Cambodian public and even among senior government leaders throughout the 1980s. Given the ongoing struggle between the transitional government and the Khmer Rouge, who still held onto pockets of power in parts of the country, anti-Vietnamese sentiment continued to play into politics. During the peace process between 1992 and 1993, the Khmer Rouge engaged in targeted attacks, killing 130 ethnic Vietnamese, injuring 75, and abducting even more in the run-up to the national election. Likewise, mainstream Cambodian politics in the early 1990s continued to hold onto anti-Vietnamese sentiment. The perceived fear of Vietnamese expansion led to a large-scale repatriation of ethnic Vietnamese. Over the last few decades in Cambodia, elections have continued to stir up anti-Vietnamese sentiment not only in politics, but also among the general Cambodian public. In 1998, rumors about Vietnamese poisoning food and water, that some accused coming from political discourse, led to mob attacks that killed a few ethnic Vietnamese bystanders on the street. Rhetoric from the 2013 election campaigns blatantly targeted ethnic Vietnamese on border issues and illegal immigration. The term *Yuan* became commonly employed in political campaigning discourse to refer to the Vietnamese. Ethnic Vietnamese businesses were ransacked in the aftermath when anti-

government post-election protests took to the streets in neighborhoods across Phnom Penh and elsewhere. An ethnic Vietnamese man was beaten to death during a traffic accident by a mob who identified him as a *Yvon* during the attack.

Contemporary nationalism framing ethnic Vietnamese as *the Other* stems from long-standing issues with deep historical layers and victimization, narratives of grievances, and challenges perceived as threats to the survival of Khmer identity. Stereotypes and sentiment about ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia, regardless of those residing in the country over generations, have developed in relation to all these factors.

## Beyond Nationalism in Local Communities

The continued border disputes and Vietnamese immigrant issues remain key drivers for anti-Vietnamese nationalism in Cambodia, which further escalates during political campaigns. Moreover, the term “Khmer” itself is another challenge. Ethnicity has similarly played a key role in the formation of a Cambodian identity. The very usage of the word Khmer in today’s context provides a discernible glimpse into societal perceptions of what it means to be Cambodian. Originally a term denoting an ethnicity, Khmer refers to descendants of the Khmer Empire, also known as the Angkor Empire, that reigned over much of Southeast Asia for centuries. Today, however, Khmer is often used interchangeably with the term Cambodian. Even in referring to other ethnicities, Khmer is usually adapted, such as in the case of ethnic Cham (Khmer Islam), Indigenous (Khmer Leu or Upper/highland Khmer), ethnic Chinese (Khmer Chin) and Khmer Krom (Lowland Khmer or currently referring to ethnic Khmer in Vietnam). This subtle but significant nuance of terminology over time has contributed to an evolving crossover between ethnicity and nationality throughout Cambodian society. With such a cultural and societal integration of ethnicities making up today’s diverse Cambodian identity, a striking exception has continued to stand out – the exclusion of ethnic Vietnamese into the Cambodian-Khmer mosaic. This phenomenon that differentiates between Khmer/Cambodian identity and ethnic Vietnamese residents stems from long-standing historical narratives and ongoing perceptions that pit “them” against “us” and affect relationships with *the Other*.

Much of the recent work in this area has striven to go beyond the differences and issues that are well-documented in academia, political discourse, and media narratives. Recognizing negative sentiment and listening to difficult conversations from diverse points of view, a recent action research initiative using an approach known as Facilitative Listening Design has put in much effort to observe and learn from existing positive dynamics and connecting elements that emerge from mixed communities living side-by-side throughout Cambodia. The learnings and findings show that people can go beyond nationalism and choose to build relationships with *the Other* in even the most challenging contexts.

Participants from Khmer and ethnic communities certainly conveyed challenges and issues they saw as problematic in regard to the other group. Nationalism was unquestionably rooted in narrative after narrative that portrayed “us” and “them.” Unsurprisingly, given the work was being carried out fully within Cambodia, Khmer perceptions often tied opinions to nationalistic narratives associated with history or politics. Again and again, stories from the past were relayed as a basis of contemporary views. The “Master’s Tea” was cited in numerous conversations, describing an incident from the 19th century of a Vietnamese emperor who captured three Khmer

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men as prisoners. After burying them up to their necks, a cauldron of water was placed on top of their heads and they were slowly burnt alive as the water was boiled for the emperor’s tea. This account was retold in conversations often associated with negative perceptions of Vietnamese behavior or malicious intentions that Khmer participants conveyed more negatively. Another common historical account referred to the Vietnamese princess who married into Khmer royalty in the 17th century. Many saw this union as the beginning of a gradual territorial loss to the Vietnamese, representing a shrunken border that continues in today’s Cambodia. Such stories were recalled over many conversations that struck tones of nationalism or posited “us” against “them” narratives.

Woven within conversations, stories, and narratives about *the Other* were also many examples of elements that did not necessarily divide Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. In fact, many communities actually demonstrated going beyond nationalistic

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Further beyond nationalist narratives, as more people engaged deeper into conversations, many also were able to humanize the *Other* and see the individual above the ethnicity.

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stereotypes and connecting to those in the other group in different contexts. Business and enterprise, by far, was a consistent connector between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese throughout Phnom Penh neighborhoods with mixed populations. Despite the occasional tension arising from competition, most involved in business discussed depending on each other. One Khmer man from the province who had moved to the city found himself working as a tuk tuk driver with the majority of his clients coming from the ethnic Vietnamese community. Despite holding onto strong anti-Vietnamese sentiment, he admitted his perceptions had changed after becoming closer and developing friendships with his customers. Other Khmer respondents also tended to speak more positively of ethnic Vietnamese in regard to business and innovation they felt they brought to the economy. Even in communities where the two groups lived more segregated from each other, it was usually business that brought them together. Further beyond nationalist narratives, as more people engaged deeper into conversations, many also were able to humanize the *Other* and see the individual above the ethnicity.

## Communities Can Shape Their Own Narratives

History has shaped the Cambodian sense of identity today just as it has among all peoples and cultures around the globe. Through centuries of nation-building to the state and borders of contemporary Cambodia, complex relationships have formed over time. Those external relationships, particularly with neighbors, inevitably affect internal relations across ethnic lines in the country. Nevertheless, at the community level, ongoing resilience and organic ways to overcome nationalistic narratives are taking place through everyday interaction and daily routine. As the communities say themselves, in the end people are people, and there are good and bad in any group. Issues of course exist, but many community residents are proving that it is not necessary to hate each other in order to address such issues. The introductory excerpt of the young Chinese-Cambodian man and the girl arguing about drinking water from the same container that ethnic Vietnamese had used is quite telling. In the end, the girl got the water container and served it to the young man suggesting he get over his fears and questioned his perceptions. It is certainly possible and very encouraging that communities have all it takes to move beyond nationalism and shape their own narratives when people are involved. ■■■



# Rising Nationalism and Islamic Populism in Indonesia

Ihsan Ali-Fauzi

Jakarta's governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, became the subject of racist comments and was regularly attacked by conservatives for being both Christian and of Chinese descent. In 2016, allegations of blasphemy led to his defeat in his bid for reelection, and he was then controversially jailed for insulting Islam. After this case, many observers believed that Indonesia was shifting toward a political Islam. Yet, the rise of Islamic policies has more to do with influential networks securing power than a creeping Islamization in Indonesian society.

On December 2, 2016, about 800,000 Muslim protesters hit the streets of Jakarta to demand the arrest of the Christian-Chinese governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, aka "Ahok." The largest in a series of such protests since October 2016, it was labeled "Defending Islam Acts." The crowd accused Ahok of blasphemy, alleging that a speech he made in September 2016 had insulted Islam. As the result of this protest, Ahok, who at the time was running for reelection, saw his polling numbers drop significantly. Conversely, the hard-line Muslim groups and politicians driving the protest enjoyed new heights of public attention. Today, we know the end of the story: Despite a 74 percent approval rating as the Jakarta governor as per December of the previous year, Ahok lost the election in April 2017. Even more tragically, he was put in jail for blasphemy, a crime most observers believe he had never committed.

The events described above have triggered heated debates, not only among Indonesians, but also among scholars working on Islam and politics in Indonesia. Was the protest a strong indicator of the increasing conserva-

tism among Indonesian Muslims? Did the groups leading the protest, such as the Islamic Defender Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), known for their association with violence, represent genuine sentiments among Muslims, or were they only pawns being used by national political actors to damage Ahok, a Christian of Chinese origin? Did the events indicate a considerable shift in the religious, social and political attitudes of Indonesian Muslims, or were they the result of a rare coincidence of political dynamics and thus unlikely to remain influential in the years to come?

Following Benedict Anderson's famous definition of the nation as "an imagined political community" (Anderson, 1991, p. 5), Indonesian nationalism can be seen positively as an everlasting project by which Indonesian citizens, as a plural community in various forms, attempt to expand their sense of "deep [and] horizontal comradeship," to borrow again from Anderson (Anderson, 1991, p. 7). From this perspective, the success of the anti-Ahok protests constitute only another, albeit huge break in the long history of a mostly healthy relationship between Indonesia as a nation and Islam as a religion embraced by the majority of Indonesians. This history started in the 1880 to 1942, during the struggle on the archipelago against Dutch colonists and later from 1942 to 1945 against Japanese colonists. The interplay between Indonesia as a nation and the religion of Islam was one of the foundations of the newly-proclaimed republic in 1945, and manifested itself in the dominant role played by the "smiling" and tolerant form of Islam during most of Indonesia's independent history. Against this background, the current anti-Ahok's case signifies what appears to be a paradox in Indonesian history. With the fall of Suharto's regime in

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1998, the country's political system became more democratic, while the expression of intolerance by some Muslim actors grew stronger.

Indonesia's democratization process provides avenues for both freedom and extremism. Indonesian politicians – in tandem with some Islamists – have always exploited the legal gray areas in Indonesia's democracy to achieve their goals. Today this is facilitated by two new factors: The first is the rising tide of Islamic populism in the country, and the second is the increased usage of hate speech as a political strategy to discredit opponents.

## The Legacy of Indonesia's "Smiling" Islam

When Indonesia achieved its independence in 1945, the country was not only one of the largest archipelagos, but also one of the most populous and multi-ethnic as well as multi-religious countries in the world. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Indonesians are proud of their country's motto: "Unity in Diversity" (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*). Also a source of great pride is the title of being the world's fourth-largest democracy, after democratic order was restored in 1998 following more than three decades of dictatorship.

Yet, there is more to this pride: Although around 87 percent of Indonesia's 260 million people are Muslims, the country cannot be classified as an "Islamic State" such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Rather, Indonesia is a state based on a national ideology called *Pancasila* (Five Principles): belief in the One Supreme God, just and civilized humanism, the unity of Indonesia, democracy and social justice.

The Indonesian Muslims should be given credit for this achievement. Both Sukarno and Hatta, the country's first president and vice-president and who jointly proclaimed independence, were themselves Muslims. Despite strong pressure from several Muslim leaders and politicians to make Islam the foundation of the state, they held on to their initial conviction that the country should not be based on any particular religious ideology, including Islam, in order to mitigate the divisive potential of such a mono-religious approach. Perhaps even more importantly, the two founding fathers were able to convince other Muslim leaders to accept and support this commitment (Ramage, 1995).

It is because of this commitment that Indonesia became known as a multi-religious

country with a strong tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism. Two Islamic mass organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (founded 1926) and Muhammadiyah (founded 1914), the largest in the world, have been the backbone not only of tolerant Islamic expression, but also of peaceful coexistence between plural communities. Hence, Indonesian Islam was also conveniently called "Islam *ramah*" (smiling Islam), in contrast to "Islam *marah*" (angry Islam).

However, this image of Indonesia has gradually changed in the 20 years since democratization. During this time, several forms of religious extremism emerged across multiple parts of the archipelago. It started with incidents of local violence of sectarian conflicts in Maluku from 1999 to 2002 between Muslims and Christians that took the lives of more than 3,000 people.

Although these violent conflicts declined remarkably around 10 years ago, their legacy is still strongly evidenced: segregation of population along religious lines, the continuing suspicion among different religious communities and much more.

Moreover, reports by human rights groups show the rise of another form of inter-religious conflict, especially over the places of worship in many parts of the country. There was not only opposition against the construction of churches in areas with a Muslim majority, but also the other way around. Sadly, a "domino effect" played a role as well: People learned bad things from other people, with the intention of revenge!

Another feature of "angry Islam" are intolerant, and sometimes even violent acts of discrimination directed toward religious minority groups such as the Ahmadis and the Shi'as, sectarian "cults," or indigenous beliefs such as Sunda Wiwitan, a religious belief system of traditional Sundanese of West Java. These forms of violent acts have precedent in the country's history, but today they have become even more deadly. In 2011, for instance, three Ahmadis were killed in West Java for their belief that there was a subsequent prophet after the Prophet Muhammad. Another incident occurred in 2012, when one religious follower of Shi'a – a branch of Islam that believes that the Prophet Muhammad designated a successor – was killed by other Muslims in Madura, East Java. Most of these violent acts unfolded due to hate speech on the internet, which mobilized Muslims in the offline world to discharge their hatred against minority religions on the streets. Because of these recurring incidents of violence in the name of Islam, some observers started to ask if Indonesian

Muslims were “joining the caravan” of violent, international Muslim groups who employ violent repertoire to achieve their goals (Bubalo & Fealy, 2005). Meanwhile, the well-known observer of Islam and politics in Indonesia van Bruinessen started to ask if we are witnessing a “conservative turn” in Indonesian Islam (van Bruinessen, 2013).

## The Paradox of Indonesia’s Democracy: Peaceful and Violent Islamists

Unquestionably, these expressions of an “angry Islam” should be seen as a main challenge to Indonesia’s young but consolidating democracy. Expressions of hate and violence are made by people who see that there is a guiding political doctrine in Islam that justifies and motivates collective action on behalf of that doctrine. These Islamists believe that Islam is a complete system of belief that regulates not only matters of worship (*ibadat*) but also of social relations (*muamalat*). In contrast to these Muslims, there are also “nominal Muslims” (also called liberal, progressive, or reformist Muslims) who see that being a Muslim is a personal matter with no necessary implication on the societal level. In the Indonesian context, the ethnologists Geertz (1960) and Hefner (1987) identified nominal Muslims among the political leaders such as Sukarno and Suharto, who they called “*abangan* Muslims.” The generic term Muslim refers in this context to both groups. The distinction between Islamist and nominal Muslim is not based on the level of their religiosity or piety, but on their stance on the relationship between Islam (as a religion) and Indonesia (as a state). Terms such as “moderate” and “radical” should be used cautiously, because they do not tell much about an individual’s actions, while democracy (including its imperative to uphold the principle of the rule of law) should concern action rather than behavior or thinking.

In any discussion about Islam and democracy in Indonesia, it is imperative to disaggregate Islamists into non-violent and violent (again: action) Islamists. Although they share the same belief that Islam demands Muslims to be socially and politically active, Islamists part company on the issue of how to perform this religious obligation. Here “non-violent Islamists” refers to those individuals and groups who condemn the use of violence to Islamize society and politics; rather, they seek to achieve the goals by working through formal institutions or civic associations. In

contrast, violent Islamists are those who reject accommodation with the state regime, refuse to participate in its institutions, and insist on the necessity of using violent means to Islamize society and politics.

The self-proclaimed “jihadists” such as Santoso, who in fact should rather be called a “terrorist,” are archetypal violent Islamists. In December 2016, these pro-ISIS groups successfully recruited and approached Dian Yulia Novi to become the first-ever female suicide bomber in Indonesia. Fortunately, the Indonesian police force knew her whereabouts before the attack and arrested her.

On the other end of the spectrum, peaceful Islamists, i.e., those who are working through democratic institutions such as general elections, are currently on the losing streak. In the last four free and fair general elections in Indonesia’s era of Reformasi, the four biggest Islamic parties jointly collected only 24 to 33 percent of total votes. This strongly suggests that the major division within Indonesian politics is not religion (between Muslims and non-Muslims) but the multi-fold nature of Islam (between Muslim groups).

Although smiling Islam has been winning in some parts of Indonesia, it has overall clearly been losing as a political ideal. Yet, the even more challenging battle is taking place in what can be described as “democracy’s gray areas.” These are the areas where legal democratic institutions or regulations are manipulated by politicians who are not necessarily sincere Muslims but play the “Islamic card” to strengthen their Islamic credentials and thereby undermine Indonesia’s democratic value of diversity.

## Jakarta Election, Islamic Populism and the Hate Spin

Another repertoire of democracy that is severely manipulated by politicians is the freedom of speech and the freedom to protest. This was especially apparent during the Ahok case, mentioned in the beginning. It showed that the Indonesian system can actually be labeled as a “mobocracy,” a situation where the law is determined by the size of the crowd involved in the protest (Ali-Fauzi, 2016).

In addition, two more factors, Islamic populism and hate spin, allowed Islamic paramilitary groups in the Jakarta election to reach new heights of popularity in Indonesia. Of course it should be taken into account that Jakarta is the most strategic political and economic site in the country – and many

observers see this election as a prelude to the presidential election of 2019, which is likely to once again bring the present President Jokowi (and former Jakarta governor whom Ahok replaced) against his old rival Prabowo Subianto. To underestimate this aspect of Jakarta, perhaps because of the assumption that paramilitary organizations such as FPI are always important, is a huge mistake. As the 2015 results of four provincial elections showed, despite their ubiquitous presence, the paramilitary's involvement in elections is *contingent* on two factors: First, they are more likely to display explicit support for particular candidates where they face competition from rival organizations; and second, they are likely to engage in concrete action to support their political allies when the level of electoral competition is also high.

Jakarta's election was an arena where these two conditions were met. Although FPI has long been famous for their hostility toward Ahok and regularly staged protests against him, the December protest they led was the only event where they were able to gather broad-based support, including from the children of former President Suharto. Thus, as Vedi Hadiz correctly suggested, "Ahok's defeat in the face of FPI-led mobilizations was considerably less of an indication of the inexorable rise of Islamic radicalism in Indonesian politics than the ability of oligarchic elites to deploy the social agents of Islamic politics in their own interests" (Hadiz, 2017, p. 267). At the same time, however, this signals the rise of Islamic populism in the country, which he defines broadly as "a variant of populism where the concept of the *ummah* (community of believers) substitutes for the concept of the 'people.' But like the 'people' in more conventional populisms, the *ummah* is made up of internally diverse social interests that are notionally homogenized through juxtaposition against a set of purported oppressors, made up of economically exploitative or culturally remote elites or even foreign interests" (Hadiz, 2018, p. 296).

Another important but under-reported aspect of the Jakarta election is the use of what Cherian George called "hate spin" (George, 2016) as a political strategy in marginalizing Ahok. This is a double-sided technique that combines hate speech (incitement through vilification) with manufactured offense taking (the performing of righteous indignation). The Jakarta election is a textbook example of how the effective use of this strategy can benefit its users: Ahok's speech was falsified to the effect that a large part of the Muslim community believed he was insulting Islam;

a religious edict (*fatwa*) was released to sanction the speech as an insult; a movement was set up to defend the edict, including by a series of protests and demonstrations; and finally, although a court was set up to judge if the defendant was guilty, the protest outside the courtroom strongly insisted that he had indeed insulted Islam.

Sadly, there is a blasphemy law in Indonesia that was used by the judges to imprison Ahok for two years. So he not only lost the election but was also jailed for a crime he has never committed. Indonesian activists and human rights defenders usually call this blasphemy law a "rubber clause" (*pasal karet*): It is so flexible that you can turn it into almost anything. ■■

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# The Religious Right and a Youth Movement for Rights: The Struggle for Pakistan's Future

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

Over the past few months, two social movements with wildly differing objectives, social bases and methods have come to the fore in Pakistan, one reinforcing Western stereotypes about the country as a hotbed of religious extremism, and the other dramatically challenging these very same stereotypes. On closer inspection, both the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) and the Tehrik-e-Labbaik-ya-Rasullallah (TLRYA) defy the established norms of political mobilization in Pakistan.

As is well documented, Pakistan's genesis as a state for the Indian subcontinent's Muslim population has, over time, resulted in religious-political forces gaining considerable material and ideological influence at all levels of state and society. In particular, militant Islamist groups were elevated to a position of unprecedented primacy in society under the regime of General Zia ul Haq (1977–1988). In this regard, the support of foreign powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia was crucial. Most academic and journalistic commentary on the process of funding and arming jihadi groups has emphasized their function as proxies against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. However, the Zia military regime also viewed the religious right – in both its mainstream and militant forms – as a domestic ally against the secular left, particularly in the Pashtun-majority region on the northwestern border with Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Zia regime's Wahhabi backers in the Gulf were keen to counter the influence of Shi'a ideas that were being exported throughout the Muslim world by Iranian clerics that had come to power in Tehran following the overthrow of the US-backed Shah in 1979.

Thus, the seeds were sown for the rise of sectarianism in Pakistani society, a trend that has intensified steadily over the subsequent decades as foreign funding has continued apace, the ideological roots of Islamism have deepened and religio-political organizations have become a source of social mobility. Sectarian conflict has for the most part pitted any number of militant Sunni sects associated with the Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadith and modern fundamentalist schools of jurisprudence (embodied by organizations such as the Jamaa't-e-Islami [JI] and Jamaa't-ud-Da'wa [JuD]) against Shi'a counterparts.<sup>1</sup> Excluded from this binary construction of sectarian conflict is the silent majority of Sunni Muslims from the Barelvi denomination.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the more militant Sunni sects, Barelvis have long been perceived as peaceful, tolerant and far more secular in their political alignments. However, the rise of the TLRYA, and a number of political movements preceding it, has put a rest to this myth of Barelvis as being apolitical and peaceful bystanders in an otherwise chaotic and heavily sectarianized political universe.

## Undermining Ethnic-Nationalism

The disbanding of secular-nationalist politics in Pashtun regions was one of the Pakistani state's original imperatives for patronizing (non-Barelvi) Sunni sects during the so-called Afghan jihad. In the 1980s, Deobandi centers of learning – and training – such as the Dar-ul-Aloom Jamia Haqqania in Akora Khattak and Dar-ul-Quran in Panjpir gained enormous influence in Peshawar Valley, the heartland of Pashtun nationalism.<sup>3</sup> These institutions

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embodied the state's policy of weaning Pashtun youth away from secular politics and drawing them toward Islamic politics. This policy has ultimately proven successful, as exemplified by the brutal lynching of a young student in April 2017 by his peers for professing progressive political views.

More generally, as geo-political winds shifted in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the deliberate implantation of Sunni militancy in Pashtun regions resulted in an enormous blowback in both the settled areas of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), both located in northwestern Pakistan, with some parts of FATA directly bordering Afghanistan. As former protégés of the Pakistani and US military establishments were turned overnight into enemies of civilization, the phenomenon that became known as Talibanization spread like wildfire; armed militant groups established autonomous governance zones in various pockets of FATA and most prominently in Swat (some 300 km from Islamabad), replete with spectacular shows of violence against both state and civilian targets.

With the specter of Talibanization haunting a TV-consuming urban middle class,

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*As former protégés of the Pakistani and US military establishments were turned overnight into enemies of civilization, the phenomenon that became known as Talibanization spread like wildfire*

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a series of military operations was launched in FATA, Swat and other affected regions under the guise of preempting the further spread of terrorist violence. While media-generated public opinion seemed to welcome these operations at the time, they caused untold misery to local populations forced from their homes into refugee camps in cities such as Mardan, Bannu and D. I. Khan, all of which are located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Even after the operations reached their ostensible conclusions, the returning population was subjected by the state's own military and paramilitary forces to official detentions, harassment and forced disappearances. Despite the rhetoric of success on the war on terror, ordinary Pashtuns lived out their lives in an overwhelming environment of fear, caught between the Taliban on the one hand, and the state's intrusive and unaccountable coercive apparatus on the other.

Indeed, the quandary of ordinary Pashtuns extended well beyond the far-flung areas that were said to be the epicenter of terrorism;

both long-term working class migrants from rural areas as well as those forced to flee from military operations were subject to intense ethnic profiling in big cities such as Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. Being a Pashtun without money and influence became an invitation to uniformed personnel of the state to engage in any number of human rights violations. The absurdity of a policy to turn ordinary Pashtuns into gun-wielding jihadis and its subsequent and arbitrary reversal had come full circle.

## The Pashtun "Blowback"

These deep contradictions were laid bare in a so-called encounter-killing in Karachi in January 2018, when a young Pashtun man, Naquibullah Mehsud, lost his life to police fire. Hailing from the Mehsud tribe, which has been at the heart of the 40-year-old war in and around the Pak-Afghan border, Naquibullah was instinctively branded a terrorist by the police officer who shot him. In reality, he was an aspiring model and a popular figure on social media. The rage of his family and friends could not be contained. Photos of various modeling shoots in Karachi were circulated online to demolish the credibility of the official narrative, thus triggering a popular uprising that became the PTM.

Within a few days, demands for Naquib's shooter to be brought to justice brought thousands of young Pashtuns onto the streets, not only in Karachi but all the way to FATA and neighboring districts such as D. I. Khan. Social media pages were soon awash with evidence of the excesses of military personnel in FATA under the guise of counter-terrorism operations, including the allegation that thousands of ordinary people in FATA had gone missing since military intervention in the region began some 10 years earlier. The PTM marched on Islamabad, and has since gone from strength to strength as Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns alike frustrated for years at the complete impunity of the military and the opaqueness of the so-called war on terror have come together to demand accountability of the all-powerful establishment. The movement is sophisticated and led by youth who, despite limited political experience, are espousing non-violence as ideology, thus ruffling the feathers of mainstream Pashtun nationalist parties who have become used to negotiating with the establishment for governmental power, especially in and around election season. Most significantly, it has continued to thrive despite an almost complete blackout by corporate media.

## The Barelvi “Option”

In contrast to the PTM, the TLYRA movement that erupted into public consciousness two months earlier enjoyed almost uninterrupted media coverage, despite the fact that its almost month-long sit-in in Islamabad in November 2017 generated far less popular support, and seemed to thrive precisely because the protesters threatened violence and disruption. In fact, it can be reasonably argued that the emergence of a new Barelvi “option” in the Islamist pantheon serves a distinct purpose – that of reasserting the disruptive power of the religious right in an environment where erstwhile militant sects can no longer be patronized by the state. Indeed, Barelvi militancy is distinctive inasmuch as it tends not to be associated with the kind of armed insurgency associated with the Deobandi/Ahl-e-Hadith school and is also far more inward-looking with its focus being the identification and elimination of “blasphemous” activities within society (as opposed to waging jihad in neighboring countries).

Organized Barelvi militancy in the contemporary epoch can in the first instance be traced to the Sunni Tehrik that emerged as a largely Karachi-based organization in the 1990s, challenging the then-hegemonic Deobandi sect. While it did engage in confrontations with Deobandi organizations – which on a handful of occasions turned violent – it quickly became identifiable with blasphemy cases, and more specifically with radical demands for alleged blasphemers to be given exemplary punishment.

However, the Barelvi militant cause came of age spectacularly through the persona of Mumtaz Qadri, a bodyguard of federal minister Salman Taseer, who gunned the latter down in broad daylight in 2011 to protest Taseer’s sympathies toward Aasia Bibi, a Christian girl facing the death penalty after having been charged under the so-called Blasphemy Law. Qadri was depicted in some media circles as a popular folk hero, and set the stage for the politicization of the hitherto peace-loving Barelvi denomination at an unprecedented scale.

When Qadri was hung in 2016, after having been sentenced to death for the murder of Taseer, Barelvi militancy reached its apogee, with thousands of clerics and their supporters emerging onto the streets before and after the hanging to demonstrate against the perceived injustice. Among the clerics that took up the mantle of the emergent Barelvi “option” was

Khadim Hussain Rizvi, who later founded the TLYRA and spearheaded the sit-in in Islamabad in November 2017.

Rizvi’s firebrand oratory style endeared him to supporters and also ensured that he would become a larger-than-life media personality who seemed to be willing to go to any lengths to defend the Blasphemy Law and its indiscriminate application. Remarkably, Rizvi registered the TLYRA as a political party under the Election Commission of Pakistan in early 2017, and within six months had garnered more than 7,000 votes in a by-election in the home constituency of beleaguered prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was engaged in a life-and-death political struggle with the military establishment. The TLYRA’s dramatic emergence onto the political landscape has fueled speculation that the military is once again ready and willing to use religion as a weapon

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Pakistan’s already divided polity is set to be further fragmented

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against political forces that do not conform to its dictates, with the Barelvi “option” remaining palatable because it does not feature the kind of egregious violence that characterized non-Barelvi militancy of yesteryear.

## An Uncertain Future

The attitudes of the state apparatus toward the PTM on the one hand, and the TLYRA on the other, indicate that little has changed in the establishment’s mindset towards secular political opponents, and that despite the enormous blowback of state patronage of religious militancy, religio-political organizations continue to serve the distinct purpose of shoring up an authoritarian structure of power. The PTM has faced repression under various guises, as well as a concerted propaganda effort to depict the movement as foreign-backed. In contrast, the TLYRA has not had to deal with any strong-arm tactics and has quickly been “mainstreamed” as an electoral force, standing hundreds of candidates in the July 2018 general election.

Importantly, the rise of the TLYRA is a largely Punjabi phenomenon, which can be clearly contrasted with the PTM’s ethnic base. This suggests further that Pakistan’s already divided polity is set to be further fragmented. Even as the use of religion as a political weapon faces a major pushback in Pashtun

regions, it appears to be as pronounced as ever in Punjab, where the ruling Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N) – which has historically cultivated ties with religious militant organizations and now looks to turn over a new leaf – is apparently being cut down to size by establishment-patronized Barelvi militants, who clearly have the ability to weaken the PML-N's electoral hold on Punjab.

All told, Pakistan's militarized structure of power is likely to lurch from one crisis to the next, which presents the omnipotent military establishment with more opportunities to play to a captive urban middle-class gallery that is always ready to applaud the uniformed guardians' "heroic" efforts to wage endless war against a nebulous "terrorist" enemy.

Yet fundamental questions about Pakistan's 70-year-old stuttering nation-building project will not go away. Instead of officially recognizing the country's diverse, multinational essence and laying the foundations of a genuine federal and democratic political-economic system, the establishment continues to insist on positing a unitary Islamic identity. However, as the above analysis confirms, Islam is far from a monolith, with the genie of sectarianism set loose by unwise state policies being an ever-growing threat to ordinary people in Pakistan and beyond. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> Sunni and Shi'a are the two major sects in Islam, akin to Catholics and Protestants within the Christian faith. The Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith are distinct schools of jurisprudence within the Sunni sect, while the JI and JuD fall into the category of Sunni without necessarily representing unique schools of jurisprudence.

<sup>2</sup> Barelvis have historically been associated with more syncretic forms of religious worship, embodied in much of South Asia by Sufi shrines.

<sup>3</sup> These are both seminaries where hundreds of young boys are imparted religious education while living permanently on the premises; the Jamia Haqqani is located in Nowshera district while the Dar-ul-Quran is in Swabi district.

# Nationalism: A Way to Overcome Afghanistan's Struggle for a Shared Identity?

Muhammad Musa Shafiq

Throughout Afghanistan's history, governments have been trying hard to forge a nation. Different policy approaches aim at instilling a sense of belonging in order to tie the diverse ethnic Afghan groups closer together. Still today this remains a challenging task since Afghanistan's society is organized along the lines of kinship and clan affiliation. Yet, a real national sentiment can only grow, if the Afghan government overcomes the tendency to serve individual interests.

Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse society. According to the existing records of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), it is home to 56 ethnic groups, speaking 47 different languages. Given Afghanistan's history of persistent ethnocentrism, creating a shared identity has been the main challenge of its nation-building process. Since the 1880s, Afghanistan's approach to building a state has been through the creation of a shared identity based on ethnicity, clan and kin. Against the background of aggravated grievances stemming from long-lasting, embittered, inter-ethnic conflicts, imposing an ethnic identity on all social cleavages and carving out a nation from the diverse ethnic milieu of Afghan society has proved to be complicated and extremely challenging.

## Ethno-Personal State

The emergence of a state in the modern sense of the term is associated with ethnic patronage and tribal conflict in Afghanistan. Ethnic cleansing, mass murders bordering on genocide and discriminatory policies created a crisis of trust and resulted in widening social gaps that have neither been healed nor remedied throughout

its modern history. From the emergence of Afghanistan as an ethno-tribal confederation in 1747, until the White Coup d'état of Dawood in 1973, when the monarch Zahir Shah was toppled, establishing the first Afghan republic, the governing system had always been a monarchical, self-proclaimed clan regime. The governing family owned all public goods, and the Afghan population was subject to arbitrary rule. The first attempt at nation-building was initiated by King Amanullah Khan, who, through the enactment of the country's first constitution in 1923, tried to define the relationship between state and nation. With the adoption of the constitution, Amanullah officially abolished slavery and set his sights on implementing a number of reforms, including the dismantling of the long-standing ethnic hierarchy in Afghanistan. Based on the Constitution of 1923, he officially terminated the ethnic supremacy heritage benefits that Abdulrahman Khan had granted the Mohammadzai clan, a sub-tribe of the Barakzai tribe from the Pashtun ethnic group. The legislation passed by Amanullah was an important step forward in the Afghan nation-building process; however, his reform agenda was challenged by tribal leaders and traditionalists who rejected the constitution for not conforming with Afghanistan's culture and religion. When Amanullah Khan was finally removed from power in 1929, his agenda for democratic reform was also abandoned. Consequently, the process of building an Afghan nation was put on hold.

Continuing the dynastic reign, but changing the state from a monarchy to a republic, Afghanistan's first president, Mohammed Daoud Khan, sought in 1973 to forge a nation through the building of infrastructure and provision of social services to all citizens. As a self-proclaimed nationalist, he tried to increase the

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national income and make Afghanistan economically self-sufficient. He established production companies and improved economic interconnectivity within Afghanistan and internationally. His economic plan included the development of industry, mining, agriculture and transportation as well as improving the range and accessibility of public services. For instance, Khan envisaged constructing 1,801 km of railroad tracks through the provinces of Herat and Kandahar to connect Kabul with border towns in Iran and Pakistan. He also attempted to use Afghanistan's natural resources to establish industries such as cement, steel, copper, chemicals and petroleum refining. In sum, these were the most detailed and ambitious infrastructure projects in the history of Afghanistan, and were meant to incentivize the nation-building process and bring a fragmented country closer together. Ultimately, Mohammed Daoud Khan's economic plan was not implemented, mostly due to a lack of budget. His ambitions to build an Afghan nation were finally aborted by the Communist coup d'état, known as the Saur Revolution, in 1978.

In the 1980s, Afghanistan fell prey to Cold War politics and was invaded by the Soviet Union. Following Soviet withdrawal in 1988, the country slipped into a devastating civil war fought by ethno-political factions. At the height of the civil war, a new radical force, the Taliban, emerged and enforced brutal power politics in Afghanistan. With the full-fledged support of Pakistan, the Taliban precipitated an intense regional competition dubbed the "mini-Great Game." As a result of conflicts and decades of war, the delicate social relationships that had been built between various ethnic groups was devastated, and what was left of the Afghan national agenda was completely demolished.

After the horrendous 9/11 attacks, the international community tried to lay the foundation for a permanent governing institution. The Bonn agreement, which established a new constitution, sought to ensure the representation of major ethnic groups in a parliamentary democracy and restart the nation-building process.

The consociational design of the agreement, however, was quickly overtaken by strong ethnic sentiments and aggravated grievances, the main drivers of ethnic mobilization in Afghanistan. Adding to this, the elites have not been able to address past grievances, nor make clear distinctions between the past and the future. The wounds of past terrors are still unhealed in the collective memory of different ethnic groups and there has to be a break to enable all social groups to hail the future and

its new promises. The country's social division is obvious and the idea of clannish favoritism is stronger than ever.

The strong societal organization around clan and kin further undermined the efforts to establish democratic processes. The question of ethnicity was, for instance, used as a vote-winning strategy in three presidential elections. The winning trio, the president and the two vice presidents, represented three major ethnic groups. The selection of political running mates was not based on the democratic and ethnic inclusiveness agenda, but on group favoritism and the strength to persuade people to vote for the sake of their ethnicity. Politicians sharing the same ethnicity as those appointed to positions of power also benefited, since ministers usually assign key positions to people of the same background as themselves. This even applies to the office of the president and vice president. Most of the positions in their offices are likewise filled by those of their own clan, and in most cases by their own family members.

Hence, state functions have long relied on kinship, creating a system ethno-nationalism. These exclusive approaches to nation-building have in fact set the backdrop of the current discontent over national identity. As a result, the state has been a main source of the nation's divergence and has caused the nation to be more fragmented than united.

## Limited Morality

In Afghanistan, almost everyone is tied to a specific identity or belief. This sense of belonging is limited to a particular kin and clan, or a school of religion that an individual follows. Islam, however, is the only religion to which individuals can express their ties publicly because it is the official state religion, and has been ever since the enactment of the first constitution in 1923. Specifically, the official religion is limited to the Hanafi school of thought, and Shiites were only just included in the 2004 constitution. This limitation has excluded believers of other religions, such as Hindus and Sikhs, from the nation-building process, causing them to feel separated and compelling them to leave the country to seek asylum.

When it comes to clan and kin, the limited morality of Afghan governance is more than obvious. For example, Abdulrahman Khan, Emir of Afghanistan from 1880–1901, believed that the Mohammadzai clan was superior to other clans in the country and bestowed upon them special benefits, which were paid for from the government budget.



Another example of limited morality and group favoritism is observable in the budgetary and financial policy of the state. There are certain provinces that receive a larger part of the budget for development than others. Even more unfortunate is the fact that, in the process of approving the budget, members of parliament are focused on their own provinces and villages. It is said that discussions over the allocation of development project funds to specific territories are more contentious than discussions about overall budget efficiency, which should indeed be more of a national interest.

Clan and religious beliefs were privileged even during the time of insurgency. When the country was ruled by the Taliban, language and religious beliefs played a crucial role. Those who knew the language of the Taliban had a greater chance of surviving. The regime also forced people of different religions to worship according to the Taliban dictate.

As a result, limited morality toward a specific clan and religion has been a serious problem that has caused the nation to feel more fragmented than ever.

## Sense of Belonging

Over the course of history, it has been difficult for Afghanistan to create a sense of belonging among its citizens. Despite constitutional nation-building efforts under Amanullah Khan, Mohammed Daoud Khan's attempt to incentivize nation-building through infrastructure projects, and the international community's engagement after the Bonn Agreement, the nation still does not have a sense of belonging to a unified country. Members of different tribes still place their clannish interests above the national interest.

The 2004 Constitution declared all citizens of the country to be Afghans and established Pashto and the country's lingua franca, Dari, as the official languages. Yet nation-building seems to be more complicated than ever. Political and cultural identity is forged most strongly through language, and the speakers of each language want theirs to prevail over the others. For example, an initiative for distributing the digital national identity card known as the "Electronic Tazkira" was halted by enraged citizens who felt that their identity was not being properly represented. Individuals and groups from various tribes reacted differently, but had one common expectation: "My Clan," not "My Nation." For many, the biggest issue is the word "Afghan" in the new identity card. Many argue that Afghan, as stipulated in the constitution, literally means "Pashtun" and can therefore

not be imposed as the shared national identity. In 2004, after a bloody conflict fought among different ethno-political factions, it was unanimously agreed that Afghan would become the shared identity of the nation, but the government's current political practice and its policy toward ethnic groups has inflamed the identity issue once more. The day the Electronic Tazkira was introduced, the national unity government was divided into two camps: President Ghani celebrated the introduction of the digital national identity card, while Abdullah, the chief executive, condemned it.

## For Afghanistan, Nationalism Is Key

In a nutshell, the nation-building process has been continuously challenged in Afghanistan by the preferences of clan and kin. Individuals have a stronger allegiance toward a small group of their own ethnicity than to the nation. The Afghan state is represented by and for a particular ethnic group, and politicians in power have used their ethnic privileges to maintain influence and appoint their ethnic brethren to top executive positions, sustaining the notion of ethnic supremacy.

Considering the history of the conflict, nationalism would be key to the country's development and stability. Without creating a strong national consensus over the democratic process and the political system, the country's path will not lead to prosperity. The enduring patronage and ethnic political approach will not help Afghanistan overcome the ongoing conflict. There needs to be a transparent and accountable government, established on the basis of democratic values, with the view and understanding of the overall national interest. Promoting a sense of nationalism in the country is therefore a political necessity. Consequently, reconciliation should not be based on narrow ethnic politics or fear, but on the basis of a national agenda with a strong nationalist view. ■■■



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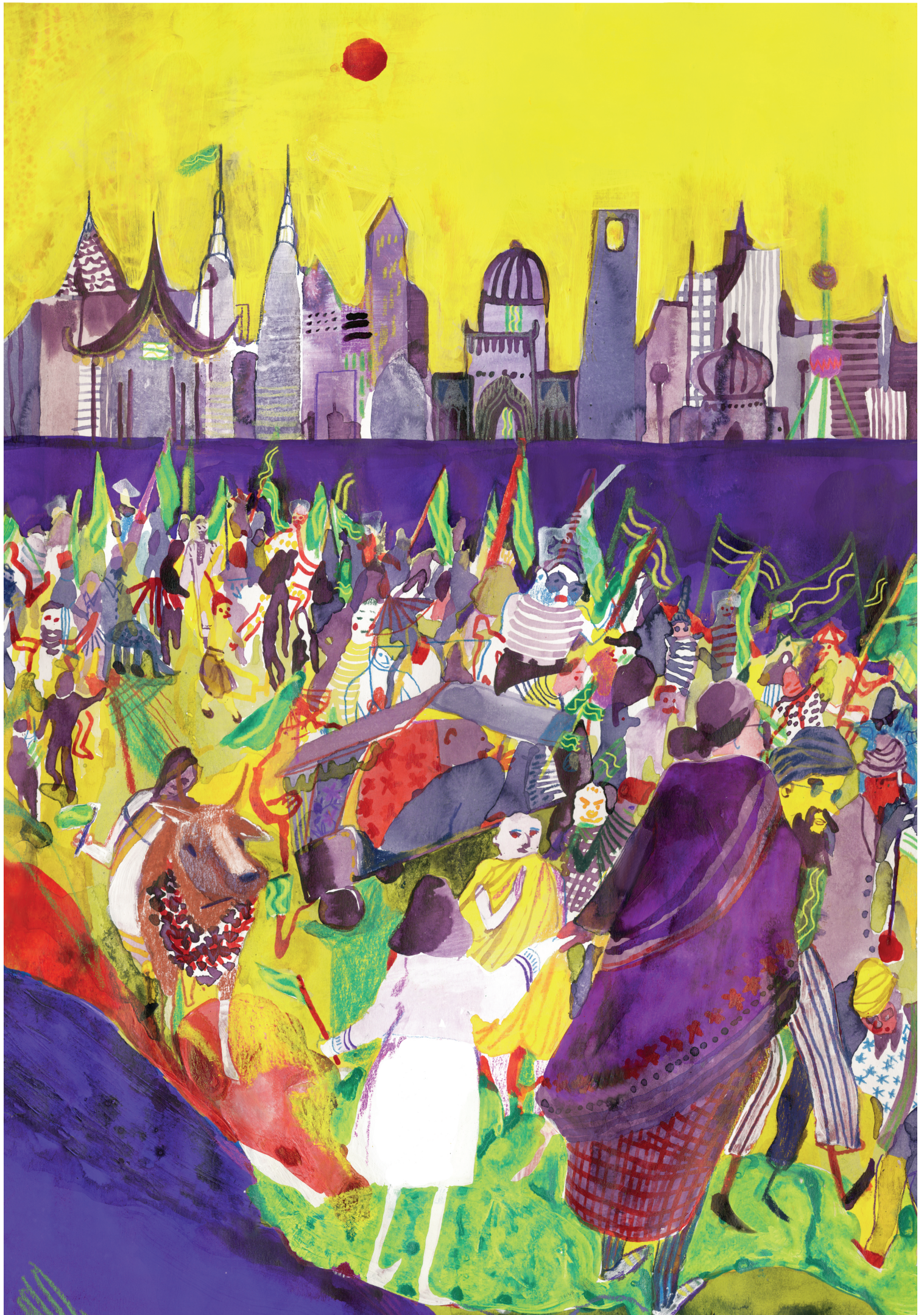
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# Poems from Asia

## Amanda Lee Koe

is a Singapore-born, New York-based author. Her first short-story collection, *Ministry of Moral Panic*, won the Singapore Literature Prize. Translated and published in Germany by Culturbooks, it was shortlisted for the Frankfurt Book Fair's LiBeraturpreis and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt's Internationaler Literaturpreis. Her debut novel, *Delayed Rays of a Star*, is forthcoming from Nan A. Talese/Doubleday.

### ***colonialism has also its modern dress***

This poem was created entirely by collaging found text. The lines in printed font are from Sukarno's grandiose opening address to the Bandung Conference in 1955, as part of the championing of the Non-Aligned Movement, which was meant to stand in solidarity against colonialism, imperialism and racism. The lines in handwriting are from a New York Times interview done in the '90s with Naoko Nemoto, better known as Dewi Sukarno—one of Sukarno's wives, whom he met on a state visit to Japan, when she was a 19-year-old Ginza hostess — whose glamorous words belie Sukarno's corruption, instituted under the hypocrisy of an autocratic system he termed "Guided Democracy".

## Bernice Chauly

is a Malaysian novelist, poet, festival director and educator. Born in George Town, Penang, to Chinese-Punjabi teachers, she read Education and English Literature in Canada as a government scholar. For over 20 years, she worked as a multi-disciplinary artist and is recognized as one of the most significant voices of her generation. She is the author of six books, which include poetry, prose and an award-winning novel, *Once We Were There* (2017). She has lectured for over 16 years in Creative Writing at colleges and universities in Kuala Lumpur and is an Honorary Fellow in Writing at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program (IWP 2014). She is the founder and director of the KL Writers Workshop (KLWW) and currently lectures at the University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM).



colonialism has also its modern dress

maybe the name sukarno is good

for making reservations, it does not

give up its loot easily. the subordination of

everything — balls, parties, gstaad,

skiing — to the well-being of mankind.

this twentieth century has been a little ant

against a giant elephant of terrific dynamism

like the old western word: lynch. the result

of this is fear, the political skill of man heavy

on my shoulders, i was too young to chain

lightning to dedicate myself to the highest code

to be one of the stones in the foundation to

project his voice and picture across tokyo

to paris to jakarta to new york to consume  
distance.

i was too young to be a widow.

6400 people in japan are over 100. i said

to myself, wow! men are so lazy today.

they mobilized no troops.

they think



a telephone call is enough. in any  
party a glass can break, no negligible precedent!

the five prime ministers  
would like to live life.

they issued no ultimatum.

how can you charge me  
with fear of ideologies?

you don't go to a New Year's party  
thinking of settlement of the long struggle in indo-china.

i was very happy in jail. i felt like i was  
in a dormitory - i felt like a student.

the peoples of asia raised their voices:

look,

i have suffered! i have  
to tell you one thing: colonialism has also its modern dress.

if i can live another 50 years, i should do something brave.  
make the desert bloom. act dangerously. demonstrate to  
the minority of the world which lives on the other continents:

i've been

to all the big parties

everywhere

there was a red carpet.

Amanda Lee Koe

Illustration: Xiyu Yang



# In My Country

Bernice Chauly, May 2018

In my country  
the word was ugly  
it was unsaid  
it was unsayable

It was honed in greedy bellies  
limp from the stench of money  
it polluted them

In my country  
we lived quietly, we worked hard  
we never stopped hoping

The air polluted us, it stained us  
we stopped reading  
we stopped thinking  
it was unnecessary  
it was dangerous

In my country  
we gave ourselves wings, to the  
envelope, that one tick, that precious  
cargo  
was all that mattered, each one  
a hopeful voyage

In my country  
we were angry, because we were not  
free  
are we now free?

What is the notion of freedom  
when we have never been free?  
we skate around like slippery cicaks  
wary, anticipating  
the next wall

In my country  
we had corrupt masters  
we listened  
afraid and embittered  
a prolonged darkness  
eating into our hearts, liver and spleen  
bile-corrupted  
we became complicit

In my country  
we were yellow in the streets  
we flooded the emissaries, we sang  
smiled and danced  
we slept on the streets

we passed green and yellow balls  
until the gas came and choked us  
tearing our throats apart

There was no country then  
no rock, no tree, no river  
nothing spoke  
no, no more history  
no stories left to tell  
the weavers were tired

Will the dead speak now?  
will their ghosts rise?  
will we hear their voices again?

Will they speak from their unholy graves  
unmarked, blood spilt in soiled earth  
marked by rotting guilt  
buried by shameful hands  
will they rest now?

Will we speak of the time when  
they brandished the keris, angry  
mouths baying for yellow blood  
will we remind them  
of the lives who tried to live?

In my country  
the word was silent  
thoughts were silenced  
stories were not told  
we were fed bloated lies  
that festered and feasted  
upon open sewers

In my country  
our black fingers  
spoke, we shared  
stories

We can write them now  
all stories are possible

In my country  
there is hope

In my beloved,  
my Malaysia

This is, now,  
my country.

