

The (Re-)Emergence of State Racism on the Eve of Regional Integration in Southeast Asia: A Survey of Five Countries

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Abstract

Up to the eve of the unveiling of ASEAN Regional Integration in 2015, cases of ethnic and racial discrimination have been reported within ASEAN member countries, with the persecution of the Rohingya of Myanmar being just one of many. This study is a preliminary look at how negative race and ethnic relations between ASEAN nationals have not abated, coloring their view of regional integration. It looks at how race relations between ASEAN member countries have developed alongside the creation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint in 2007 up to the present. Based on a review of the structure of the ASEAN and a tally of racial conflicts within five Southeast Asian countries, we

offer two observations. First, the situation in Southeast Asia parallels the growth of an anti-regionalist sentiment in Europe due to supposed violations of national sovereignty. Second, and perhaps more importantly, due to the fraught histories and conditions of nation-state consolidation experienced by the ASEAN member countries, they do not fit in the scheme of cross-national integration as framed by the ASEAN itself.

Key terms ASEAN, racism in Southeast Asia, ethnic conflict, international relations, regionalism in Asia

The Rohingya Case as “Pandora’s Box”

In early May 2015, the world watched as Southeast Asia was rocked by a humanitarian crisis involving hundreds of refugees from an ethnic group called the Rohingya. Having been subjected to systematic discrimination in their home country of Myanmar since the 1950s, the Rohingya have been forced to flee for their lives and attempt to seek refuge in any country that would take them in. The discovery of a mass grave in Songkhla, Thailand, last May 2,¹ and in Perlis, Malaysia, last May 24,² reportedly filled with dozens of dead Rohingya kept against their will by human traffickers, as well the multiple cases of Asian governments denying them asylum

¹ *The Daily Star*, “Bangladeshi Migrants’ Mass Grave in Thailand!” May 2, 2015, <http://www.thedailystar.net/country/mass-grave-bangladeshi-myanmar-migrants-found-thailand-80115>.

² *Al Jazeera*, “Malaysia Finds Mass Graves of Suspected Migrants,” May 24, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/malaysia-mass-graves-150524070422569.html>.

(Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia)³ have contributed to a furor of opinions and advocacies in an attempt to address this severe human rights concern. Seven hundred Rohingya and Bangladeshi immigrants testified that their boats were left adrift at sea, half full of sea-water, forcing them to throw off their fellow refugees—horrifying even the journalists covering them.⁴

Such developments cast quite a pall over the goal the ASEAN had intended to achieve in 2015: the achievement of an integrated ASEAN community. The regional organization's member-states committed to restructuring their trade and economic relationships with each other in order to facilitate the first step of this project: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which would presumably establish a single market and production base making ASEAN more dynamic and competitive with new mechanisms and measures to strengthen the implementation of its existing economic initiatives; accelerating regional integration in the priority sectors; facilitating movement of business persons, skilled labor and talents; and strengthening the institutional mechanisms of ASEAN.⁵

This project, as it is, is confronted by the real public concern that “actions towards regional economic integration must not only respond to market-related changes in global and regional demand, investments, and supply chains. They must also constitute self-determined and coherent efforts in delivering on the social

³ *Rappler*, “FAST FACTS: Who are the Rohingya?” May 20, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/93786-fast-facts-rohingya>.

⁴ *Rappler*, “Desperate Scenes in Rohingya, Bangladeshi Migrant Boat Rescued Off Indonesia,” May 15, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/world/regions/asia-pacific/indonesia/93333-desperate-scenes-rohingya-bangladesh-migrant-boat-rescue-langsa-aceh>.

⁵ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat, *ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2008), 5.

objectives of the ASEAN Community.”⁶ Yet these aspirations of the ASEAN, despite their seeming munificence, are currently belied by the reality that the very idea of “an ASEAN community” is being contested by the internecine racial conflicts within ASEAN member-states themselves.⁷ The question of why these negative racial tensions and fault lines persist—despite the supposed participation of member-states in this project—should be subject to question.

This study, under the lens of critical multiculturalist perspectives, thus looks at how race relations within and amongst ASEAN member countries have developed since the signing of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint in 2007. Through a review of the structure of the ASEAN vis-à-vis its member nation-states and salient provisions of the AEC Blueprint, by comparing the structure of the ASEAN with that of the European Union (EU), and by tallying racial conflicts inside Southeast Asia for the aforementioned period, we offer two significant observations:

First, due to the fraught histories and conditions of nation-state consolidation experienced by the ASEAN member countries, they do not quite fit in the scheme of cross-national integration as it is framed by the ASEAN Secretariat. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this phenomenon/situation parallels the growth of an anti-regionalist sentiment in Europe, due to supposed violations of/transgressions against national sovereignty. This preliminary

⁶ International Labor Organization (ILO), *ASEAN Community 2015: Managing Integration for Better Jobs and Shared Prosperity* (Bangkok: ILO and Asian Development Bank, 2014), 1.

⁷ We choose to consider and peg the idea of “ethnic conflict” on the same level as “racism,” as a response to an existing silence in the literature. As we will exhibit later, “racism” and “ethnic conflict” manifest in the same policy and socio-cultural actions, choices, and realities.

study, for the sake of brevity and limited by the availability of documents, only covers five out of ten ASEAN member-states, namely, Thailand, Burma, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Nevertheless, our findings will also attempt to indicate possible directions for research covering the whole region along these lines.

ASEAN: Rooted in Nationalism?

Since its creation, ASEAN has struggled to find a common identity for further integration. Originally, ASEAN was a response to the growing tensions between the former Soviet Union and the United States of America. With the end of the Cold War, the absence of an external threat left ASEAN member-states little reason for more intensive relations. Although the association continued to exist, ASEAN upheld what, to us, is a paradoxical combination of regional cooperation and the policy of non-interference. The policy defies logical practice in international relations—if only because there is a need for some level of interference when certain member-states refuse (or are unable to maintain) the standards that the region claims to uphold.

Because most ASEAN members were young and emerging nation-states, there was a need to highlight the importance of non-interference in each nation's domestic affairs. This "ASEAN way" was marked largely by proceedings marked by cautious diplomacy, earning the term "Sport-shirt diplomacy." Furthermore, ASEAN members' individual governments were authoritarian regimes that undermined principles of multiculturalism, human rights, and liberal democracy. The hesitance for genuine integration among members can be attributed to two primary factors: (1) the numerous international tensions between member-states during its formative years (such as the Sabah conflict and tensions in Indochina); and (2)

the priority given by member-states' to their respective nation-building projects. In this study, we shall focus on the latter, since such nation-building informs the racially motivated policies aggravating tensions currently besetting the region.

Whether emerging from post-colonial, post-authoritarian, or post-communist contexts, the formation of the nation-state's identity was a pressing issue for each member-state. Arguably implicit in the region's lackluster commitment to further political and economic integration is the prioritization of forming each nation's individual identity and territory rather than assisting their neighbors. Another possible obstacle is the aversion, in varying degrees, of certain countries towards liberal democracy and its value of multiculturalism. Compared to other regions in the world, Southeast Asia did not as easily transition to (or accept) ideals that are perceived to be a Western invention.⁸

Prior to the emergence of nation-states and regional associations, Southeast Asia's socio-political, ethnic, and religious diversity escaped easy categorization and hampered both comparative studies and international relations. Anthony Reid, in his typology of nationalisms, makes a distinct category of nationalism called *state nationalism*, recognizing the agency of the state in the creation of a national identity through state ritual, education, and media.⁹ With the rise of the modern state, Southeast Asian identities shifted from the pre-colonial "state-averse" identities to state-constructed

⁸ Mark Thompson, "The Worldwide Wave of Democratization and the ASEAN Experience," in *The Development of Democracy in the ASEAN Region* by Leopoldo J. DeJillas and Gunther Karche (Makati City: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Institute for Development Research and Studies, 1997).

⁹ Anthony Reid, *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

identities.¹⁰ The region's heterogeneity necessitated state-led efforts in making the social landscape more legible, coherent, and governable.¹¹ Increasing the legibility of such societies involves manipulating the natural environment, segregating populations into settlements depending on class or ethnicity, and weakening possible resistance in civil society.¹²

What is clear with the construction of ASEAN's Regional Secretariat and its institutions is that it is following the trends and dynamics of existing global and transnational institutions in forwarding its agenda. It is therefore unsurprising that ASEAN's regional project has invited comparisons with the European Union (EU), a larger, older, and relatively more-institutionalized regional grouping. The EU is viewed as having descended from the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 via the Treaty of Rome. Further revisions occurred in 1986 through the Single European Act (SEA) and the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which gave it its current structure and mandates in "education, culture, public health, industry and other policy areas."¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1998), 185.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mario Telo, *European Union and New Regionalism: Regional Actors and Global Governance in a Post-Hegemonic Era*, 2nd ed. (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 209.

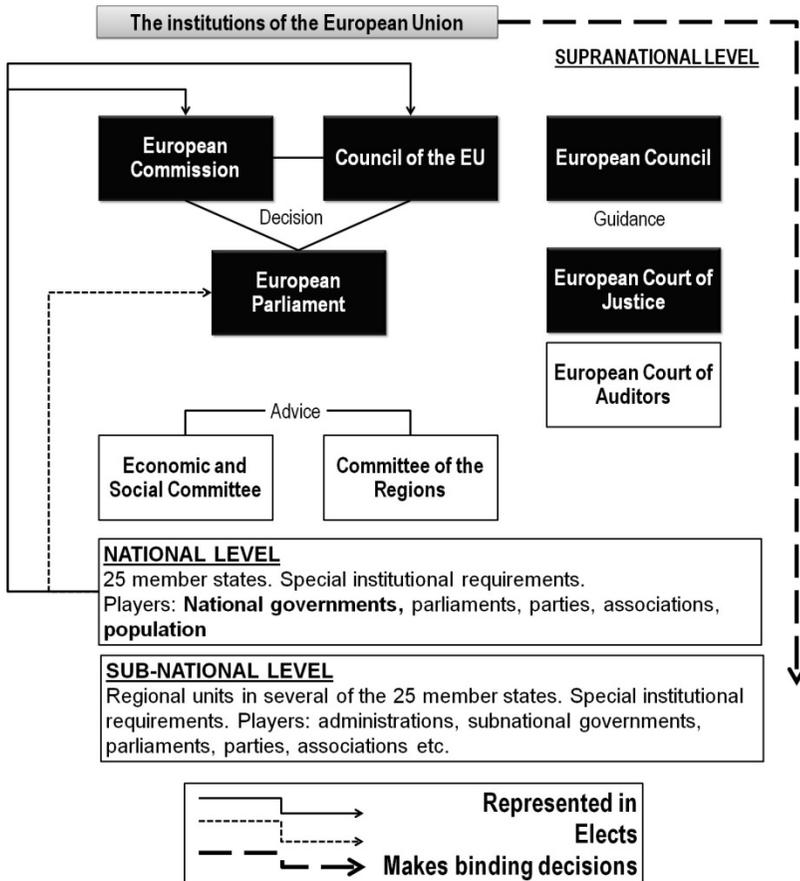


Fig. 1. European Union (EU) Organizational Structure, in relation to its member nation-states.¹⁴

The EU has its own institutions, policy agenda, and, subsequently, a certain level of autonomy from its component nations. The organizational structures (see Fig. 1) suggest that the

¹⁴ Recreated by the authors. Original figure: Wolfgang Schumann, “European Union: EU Structure 3,” *D@dalos*, last modified September 29, 2007, http://www.dadalos-europe.org/int/grundkurs4/eu-struktur_3.htm.

EU, as an institution in “co-federalism” with its member-states, is expected to be able to address and modify existing policies while maintaining the integrity of each member’s national sovereignty.¹⁵ Conversely, however, the EU’s institutional strength vis-à-vis its relationship with the member-states varies.¹⁶ The EU’s institutional development gives the impression that its methods could be adapted in whatever region, which is reflected in the ASEAN structures.¹⁷

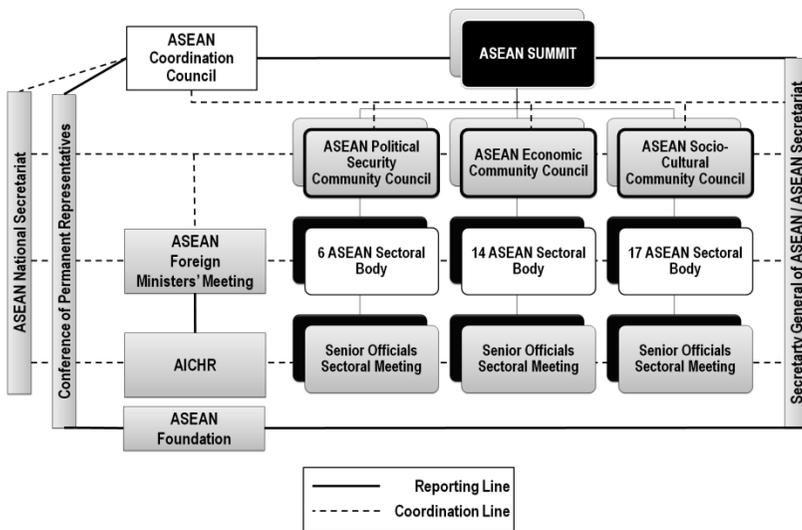


Fig. 2. ASEAN Organizational Structure.¹⁸

¹⁵ Andrew Geddes, *The European Union and British Politics* (Hampshire: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004), 56.

¹⁶ As described: “[T]he EU’s ‘federal’ centre is weak—or rather its strength varies across issue areas with strong legal competences and a strong regulatory presence in core areas such as the internal market and competition policy and a relatively weak coordinating role in other areas, particularly those surrounding the core functions of modern welfare states.” From Mark A. Pollack and Molly A. Ruhlman, “The Heroic Age of European Integration is Over: Institutional and Policy Developments, 1957–2007,” in *Reflections on European Integration: 50 Years of the Treaty of Rome*, ed. David Phinnemore and Alex Warleigh-Lack (Hampshire: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009), 49.

¹⁷ Jens-Uwe Wunderlich, “The EU an Actor *Sui Generis*? A Comparison of EU and ASEAN Actorness,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 50.4 (2012): 664.

¹⁸ Recreated by the authors. Original figure: Boutsady Khounnouvong, “Findings Shared at Southeast Asian Regional Consultation,” *Gender Development Association*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.gdglaos.org/findings-shared-at-southeast-asian-regional-consultation>.

Nonetheless, the ASEAN's systems differ significantly with the EU's model—specifically in embedding the heads of the member nation-states within its offices and institutions. Instead of instating the ASEAN Secretariat above the member-states (as the EU organizational structure suggests), its structure is more horizontal. As provided by Chapter IV, Articles 7 to 15 of the ASEAN Charter, the highest organ of the ASEAN is the ASEAN Summit which is comprised of all member countries' Heads of State. The ASEAN Secretariat is primarily acting in a coordinating capacity, conducting its activities and policy-making simultaneously with the member-states' representatives in the ASEAN Coordinating Councils and Community Councils (see *Fig. 2*).¹⁹

It must be noted that ASEAN and EU do have separate origins, institutional priorities, and internal structures. Nevertheless, for this study, we would like to highlight how these regional organizations are experiencing the same inability to address ethnic differences. The causes of their respective humanitarian crises may manifest in different intensities, but they nevertheless show up in the same symptoms. We observe how ASEAN's responses to these crises are, to a certain extent, informed by the challenges EU faced due to the extent of its authority over the regions—and how unwelcome its authority has appeared. If EU's imposition of regional standards and commitments will not work, then ASEAN's non-interference clause may indeed serve its purposes better. In reality, however, this policy intensifies the problem, which regional responses could have addressed.

¹⁹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat, *The ASEAN Charter* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2008), 10–19.

The formation of the nation-state was dominated by a need for categorizing numerous ethnic groups. Between the necessity for order and the reality of ethnic diversity, Southeast Asian nations took the road of consolidating a single ethnic majority. Jamie Davidson noted shifts in the debate on political ethnicity: whereas during the 1960s, debates on ethnicity focused on whether it was “primordial” or constructed through social interactions, the advent of high-speed globalization prompted scholars to reassess ethnicity as a product of state and market interests.²⁰ Similarly, David Brown ties ethnic relations to the state, the latter’s strength a major factor that could affect whether harmonious relations between ethnic groups will be maintained or not.²¹ The process would involve the privileging of a particular ethnic majority while disempowering minorities. Miles and Goldberg would both contend that race and nation are hinged on simultaneous processes of inclusion and exclusion, of creating an ideal national image which is based on a “genetic”, racial principle. The deployment of race in nation-building is useful in the creation of homogeneity within their respective borders.²² Ironically, these attempts at establishing an ethnic- and race-based social order are producing more tensions and conflicts.

Revisiting Racism

To fully appreciate the significance of existing stopgaps within international relations and cultural encounters across regional

²⁰ Jamie S. Davidson, “The Study of Political Ethnicity in Southeast Asia,” in *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis*, ed. Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Dan Slater, and Tuong Vu (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2008), 225–26.

²¹ David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

²² Robert Miles, “Recent Marxist Theories of Nationalism and the Issue of Racism,” *British Journal of Sociology* 38.1 (1987): 24–43; David Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2009), 5.

groupings, it would be significant to discuss the relationship between racism and the creation of a national identity. Many scholars have written about the complex and multifaceted nature of racism. Most definitions of racism include these three components: (1) the categorization of people based on the ascription of social meanings to phenotypical, cultural, and/or linguistic characteristics; (2) the use of these categories to justify the establishment or sustainment of a racial order where some groups are superior to others; and (3) practices, institutions, and structures that discriminate against particular groups of people on the basis of race.²³ These manifestations of racism cannot be separated from the social, cultural, historical, and political context. Hence, as this article will show through the different case studies, the process of defining national identity is often accompanied by policies, institutions, and sentiments that discriminate against races that are excluded from the “imagined community.”

Scholars have found the need to distinguish different manifestations of racism from one another. Carmichael and Hamilton argued that there were two kinds of racism: (1) overt and individual racism (acts of violence and verbal abuse), and (2) covert and institutional racism. They argued that individual overt acts of violence alone do not constitute racism; societal institutions themselves can be discriminatory towards groups of people.²⁴ For instance, they pointed out that the prevalence of infant deaths

²³ George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002); Steve Garner, *Racisms: An Introduction* (London: Sage Publishing House, 2010); Adolfo Reed, “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism,” *New Labor Forum* 22.1 (2013): 49–57, <https://libcom.org/files/Marx,%20Race%20and%20Neoliberalism%20-%20Adolph%20Reed.pdf>.

²⁴ Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: Politics of Liberation in America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

among African Americans is a result of the lack of access to shelter and medical facilities.²⁵ A number of scholars have since studied institutional discrimination against African Americans.²⁶ Therefore, individuals are not the only perpetrators of racism. Institutions themselves can be racist if their policies and practices, intentionally or unintentionally, systematically favor one race over another. As the following case studies will reveal, both forms of racism can be found in Southeast Asian countries.

Clearly, there are many reasons why racism, in its various forms, continues to exist. Brown argued that the rational, yet vulnerable, individual “seeks support and reinforcement, therefore, in the attempt to gain a strong sense of individual identity, emotional security, and moral authority.”²⁷ He then argues that this sense of belonging to a particular cultural grouping is concretized in a kinship myth that narrates the particular group’s origin and mission. Racial conflict arises precisely because these groups are often defined in contrast to other groups.

Increasing rates of migration are another source of racial conflict. Immigrants are often the targets of racial discrimination in their host countries. The native population often blames migrants for the country’s high unemployment rate and shrinking social safety nets, as the Singaporean case study would show. Moreover, migrants are marginalized and excluded for practicing their “inferior” culture instead of assimilating.²⁸ Clearly, economic liberalization and mass

²⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁶ Louis L. Knowles and Kenneth Prewett, *Institutional Racism in America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969); Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); David Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²⁷ Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, 6.

²⁸ Michael McClintock, *Everyday Fears: A Survey of Violent Hate Crimes in Europe and North America, Human Rights First*, 2005, <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/discrimination/pdf/everyday-fears-080805.pdf>.

migration often leads to racial conflict because citizens who have been “left behind” are often resentful towards newcomers or those who are seen as the “winners” of globalization. ASEAN integration will mean more economic liberalization and migration in South East Asia. A number of scholars have written about the history of ethnic and racial conflict in South East Asian countries.²⁹ Meijknecht and Vries have pointed out that many of the ASEAN members have not signed or ratified international treaties that affirm cultural diversity and protect the right of minorities.³⁰ What has not been studied much, however, is if integration will foster racism within and amongst South East Asian countries. As we will illustrate in the five case studies in the present work, the ASEAN member-states have had contentious cases of domestic socio-cultural integration—which are likely to color their responses to regional intervention in their domestic policies.

Case Studies

Malaysia’s Racial Nationhood

Among the ASEAN member-states, Malaysia arguably bears the most recognizable and complex signs of institutional deployment of race in both policy and nationalist ideology. As a case study, Malaysia highlights the strong presence of racially based policies by a core ASEAN member, long uninhibited by the regional body. Because of Malaysia’s multifaceted ethnic tensions and racially

²⁹ Brown, *Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thompson, ed., *Ethnic Conflicts in South East Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publication, 2005).

³⁰ Anna Meijknecht and Byung Sook de Vries, “There a Place for Minorities’ and Indigenous Peoples’ Rights within ASEAN? Asian Values, ASEAN Values and the Protection of Southeast Asian Minorities and Indigenous Peoples,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 17 (2010): 75–110.

skewed state actions, this section focuses on three primary manifestations of racism in lieu of an exhaustive investigation:

- a) Malaysia's continued application of colonial categories it inherited under British rule;
- b) the competing notions of Malaysian nationalism upheld by the country's two leading political parties, namely, the Bumiputera-centric platform of the United Malaysian's National Organization (UMNO) and the ethno-religious deployment of Islam by the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS); and
- c) The New Economic Policy (NEP), a central economic program primarily benefitting the Malay majority.

The case of Malaysia particularly demonstrates how deeply ingrained colonial divisions, disjointed national ideologies, and social inequality prevent the formation of national solidarity—and even more so, regional solidarity, if only because one cannot be achieved without the other.

Like many former colonies, Malaysia is a product of aggressive administrative and scholarly reimagining and reformation. While clearly not the only post-colonial state in South East Asia, Britain's colonial influence from upon Malaysia has deeply informed its longstanding and deliberate racial exclusion and privileging. Goh identifies Malaysia as a postcolonial society built on colonial racialization and imposition of absolute power.³¹ Consistent with Scott's theory of legibility, the British colonial powers sought to simplify the existing multi-ethnic society in Malaysia for a more

³¹ Daniel P. S. Goh, "From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Cultural Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore," *Sociology Compass* 2.1 (2008): 234.

efficient population management. Such efforts upset the balance between the ethnic groups and set several power struggles lasting long after their departure.

Their influence on the Malaysian identity began with colonial historiography as western scholars accumulated and constructed knowledge on what constituted “Malay.”³² Every aspect of “Malay” life was studied and classified in various disciplines: “zoology, geology, botany, ethnography, economic products, history, and sociology.”³³ From here emerged a narrative intertwining the native’s ethnicity with their character, claiming that the Malay required guidance, thus justifying the prolonging of imperialism.³⁴ A particular colonial and scholarly tool formative to the “Malay” identity is the census, where the population is arbitrarily segregated into Malay and non-Malay demographics.³⁵

During the early censuses of 1891, Malays were classified along with Aborigines, Dyak, Manilamen (Filipinos) under “Malays and other natives,” while Arabs and Chinese were classified as “others.” The establishment of a “local/native” was unclear here since migrants such as Filipinos counted as Malays. Their “othering” of Chinese and Indians stemmed from their distrust of oriental merchants. On the administrative side, the colonial government preferred partnering with the local Malay elite and formed more developed patronage ties with them. Furthermore, the British colonial government only granted citizenship status to the

³² Amri Baharuddin Shamsul, “A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of ‘Malayness’ in Malaysia Reconsidered,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32.3 (2001): 355–66.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Charles Hirschman, Richard Alba, and Reynolds Farley, “The Meaning and Measurement of Race in the US Census: Glimpses into the Future,” *Demography* 37.3 (2000): 381–93.

³⁵ Ibid.

Anglicized descendants of Malay immigrants and maintained non-resident statuses for the Chinese and Indians.³⁶ With Malaysia leaving British suzerainty, the task of nation-building fell to the newly independent Malaysian administration. They inherited an arbitrarily-divided society. With the formation of the Malaysian federation in 1948, the term, Malay began to include the “Dusun” and “Murut” in Sabah and the “Melanau” in Sarawak,³⁷ further muddying the definition of “Malay.”

As previously mentioned, the two primary vehicles of national unity in Malaysia’s highly heterogeneous ethnic profile were represented by the two major parties, the pro-Bumiputera UMNO and the Islamic PAS. Since their emergence, they have represented elite interests³⁸ and have struggled to establish lasting unity in Malaysia. An event representing their early failure is the May 13 incident of 1969, a riot that broke from the general dissatisfaction of the electoral results and social inequality with the Chinese’s economic dominance and the Malay’s political dominance.³⁹ The general resentment towards the Chinese economic elite eventually caused the further violent encounters known as the 1964 race riots, which led to Singapore’s secession from Malaysia. Though Singaporeans escaped violence, Singapore retained the similar CMIO demographics and similar tensions, albeit to a lesser degree. Their management of ethnic issues still encourages similar inequalities and will be discussed in the succeeding section.

³⁶ Goh, “From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism,” 234.

³⁷ Hirschman, Alba, and Farley, “The Meaning and Measurement of Race in the US Census,” 254.

³⁸ Anthony Reid and Michael Gilson, ed., *Islamic Legitimacy in a Plural Asia* (London: Routledge, 2008).

³⁹ Kenzō Hori, “Disintegration of the Colonial Economic Legacies and Social Restructuring in Malaysia,” *The Developing Economies* 29 (1991).

The Malaysian government's response to the ethnic tension became known as the Bumiputera policies, a set of economic and political reforms aimed at improving the lives of the Malay people. The policies were further strengthened by the Constitutional Article 153, where indigenous Malays were known as "Bumiputera," or "sons of the soil," and were given special statuses in business, education, and public service.⁴⁰ According to Shamsul, the constitution associated Malay identity with (1) a line of kingship acknowledging descent from Srivijaya and Melaka, and (2) a commercial diaspora retaining the customs, language, and trade practices of Melaka.⁴¹ Instead of empowering all ethnic communities, this established the Malay as a dominant group and further deepened the socio-economic disparities in the country.

The most prominent of the policies is known as the New Economic Policy or NEP (1971–1990), which sought to "eradicate poverty regardless of race" by "restructuring society to eliminating the identification of race with economic function."⁴² However, in practice, this primarily benefitted the Bumiputera and de-concentrated financial capital, land ownership, and jobs from the Chinese economic classes. Indeed, these economic policies have allowed the Malay middle class to flourish and produced a Bumiputera business class⁴³. These policies have done little in improving interethnic relations and have thus formed an uneasy cohabitation between the ethnic groups.⁴⁴ Though the violent

⁴⁰ M. Shamsul Haque, "The Role of the State in Managing Ethnic Tensions in Malaysia: A Critical Discourse," *American Behavioral Scientist* 47.3 (2003): 240–66.

⁴¹ Shamsul, "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History," 363.

⁴² Jomo Kwame Sundaran. *The New Economic Policy and Interethnic Relations in Malaysia* (UNRISD, 2004).

⁴³ John H. Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia, c. 1800–1990: The Transition to Modern Economic Growth* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

⁴⁴ Cf. page 73n42.

clashes have faded since the May 13 incidents and the 1964 race riots, racial inequality persists through preferential policies and skewed public institutions. Similarly, Singapore has its share of skewed policies towards immigrants in its role as a global trade center. The following section discusses the peculiarities of Singapore although it has a population similar to Malaysia.

Singapore: Imagined Community, Imagined Racial Fault Lines

Singapore has always been a multi-ethnic society. Today, 74 percent of Singaporean citizens are Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese Chinese, while the Malays comprise 13.3 percent. The Indians, which includes Tamils from Sri Lanka and Punjabis, compose 9.2 percent of the citizens, and the remaining 3.3 percent is labeled as “other.”⁴⁵ The citizens constitute around 71 percent of the 5.47 million residents of the country. The remaining 29 percent are migrants who can be divided into (1) work permit holders (46 percent), (2) employment pass holders (11 percent), or (3) foreign domestic workers (13 percent).⁴⁶ These classifications are one way that the government is able to encourage the migration of “desired” talent (educated and affluent foreigners) and regulate the influx of foreign labor (domestic workers and construction workers). The strategies employed by the Singaporean state to manage the influx of migrants have been perfectly consistent with its own attempts to regulate race relations between citizens. The ASEAN integration, with its promise of making the flow of labor “freer” in the region, will likely intensify anti-migrant sentiment in the country, as an

⁴⁵ *CLA Fact Book*, cited by *Index Mundi*, 2013, http://www.indexmundi.com/singapore/demographics_profile.html.

⁴⁶ National Population and Talent Division, *2014 Population in Brief* (Singapore, 2014), 4, <http://www.nptd.gov.sg/portals/0/homepage/highlights/population-in-brief-2014.pdf>.

analysis of the state's history of dealing with race relations will reveal.

The multi-ethnic composition of Singapore has decisively shaped the process of state formation in the country. The Singaporean government developed institutions and systems that would allow it to control, manage, and harness its residents' diversity towards state-defined interests. Through administrative, bureaucratic, and even authoritarian means, Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party managed the development of ethnic consciousness that would align with state objectives.⁴⁷ In fact, the government enshrined multiracialism—not multiculturalism—as one of the founding ideologies of Singapore. The difference between multiculturalism and multiracialism is that the latter conflates culture with race by treating culture as the natural—and inseparable—extension of race. The government avoided the “melting pot” strategy that countries like the United States have used in dealing with migrants. It instead opted to “essentialize” the races and their cultural differences, as seen in the government's decision to institutionalize the recognized racial categories—Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other (CMIO)—as the building blocks of a new nation. The state is thus expected to be a “color blind” body that valued merit and guaranteed stability.⁴⁸ Clearly, the objective was to curb the threat of racial conflict and encourage national solidarity.

The importance of racial harmony was made apparent in the racial riots of 1964, which had a profound influence on the state's policies on multiracialism. In fact, the memory of the 1964 racial

⁴⁷ Brown, *Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, 46.

⁴⁸ Angelia Poon, “Pick and Mix for a Global City,” in *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. Daniel P. S. Goh et al., (New York: Routledge, 2009), 72.

riots has been framed by the government in such a way that it would justify constitutional arrangements and laws concerning race relations.⁴⁹ For Lee Kuan Yew, the 1964 riots have shown the importance of having constitutional provisions concerning the races of Singapore. According to the government, state intervention in race relations is justified in order to prevent more riots from taking place. In the words of Cheng, “The representations of the memories of the riot as racial can be associated with the processes of state and nation building, within which ‘political rhetoric’ depends on the past as a ‘legitimation device’ for political action.”⁵⁰ The 1964 riots were therefore represented in such a way as to justify the implementation of policies that would supposedly ensure racial harmony in Singapore.

Nevertheless, tensions between the different races still exist. The Malays, for example, could point to the socio-economic disparity between the Chinese and the other races. Inequality became most apparent from 1975 to 1980 when, in that same period, the percentage of low-income Malays rose from 62.55 percent to 64.1

⁴⁹ For example, merely a year after the race riots, Lee Kuan Yew, in a parliamentary debate, said:

The people of migrant stock here who are a majority, learnt of the terrors and the follies and the bitterness which is generated when one group tries to assert its dominance over the other on the basis of one race, one language, one religion, it is because I am fortified by this that my colleagues and I were determined as from the moment of separation, that this lesson will never be forgotten. So it is that into the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore will be built-in safeguards insofar as the human mind can devise means whereby conglomeration of numbers, of likeness, as a result of affinities of race or language or culture, shall never work to the detriment of those who by the accident of history find themselves in minority groups in Singapore.

From Lee Kuan Yew, “Summary of the Speech by the Prime Minister Mr. Lee Kuan Yew,” speech delivered on December 14, 1965, Singapore (National Archives of Singapore), <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19651214b.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Adeline Low Hwee Cheng, “The Past in the Present: Memories of the 1964 ‘Racial Riots’ in Singapore,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 29.3 (2001): 447, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23653959>.

percent while the percentage of low-income Chinese dropped from 67.15 percent to 41.8 percent.⁵¹ In response to Malay criticism, Chinese Singaporeans consistently argued that differences in income could be explained by cultural inadequacies rather than systemic discrimination. In reality, according to Li, the government considered the “rural orientation” of the Malays and their “lack of achievement motivation” as causes of poverty amongst the population.⁵² This position is reflected in the government’s establishment of Mendaki (the Council for the Education of Muslim Children) in 1982—an attempt to instill the values of meritocracy in the Malays. In fact, Lee Kuan Yew, in an interview for the book *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, has argued that some groups are simply inferior to others.⁵³

Hence, the Singaporean state has invoked a form of cultural racism by (1) conflating race with culture, and (2) insisting that some cultures are superior to others. In justifying these inequalities, the government has claimed to be “race-blind” and only concerned with establishing a meritocratic society. The invocation of meritocracy has therefore allowed the government to deny the passage of affirmative action bills on the grounds that they are a form of reverse racism.

⁵¹ Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy, and Ideology* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), 179.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 176. It must be noted, however, that racial conflict *between* Singaporean citizens reached its apogee during the 1964 and 1969 race riots, with the government being accused of favoring the Chinese over the other races. Since then, the major race riots have been between Singaporean citizens and migrants.

⁵³ Lee was quoted as saying: “If I tell Singaporeans—we are all equal regardless of race, language, religion, culture, then they will say, ‘Look, I’m doing poorly. You are responsible.’ But I can show that from British times, certain groups have always done poorly, in mathematics and in science. But I’m not God, I can’t change you.” From Jim Sleeper, “Lee Kuan Yew’s Hard Truths,” *Open Democracy*, April 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/jim-sleeper/lee-kuan-yew%E2%80%99s-hard-truths>.

With the advent of globalization, Singapore has had to deal with racial tensions between its citizens and its migrants. For Poon, Singapore is caught in a double bind: on the one hand, the country aims to become a global city that is able to attract both highly-skilled foreign talents and unwanted but needed low-paid foreign workers; on the other hand, though, the country must be able to placate its citizens and ensure racial stability.⁵⁴ Hence, Singapore has developed a number of mechanisms to prevent the “dilution” of Singaporean society and encourage the permanent residence of what Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in a 1997 *Business Times* interview, would call “migrant talent [which would] energize society.” These regulatory mechanisms are a form of “bio-policing” that “restrict[s] reproduction and produce[s] specific forms of embodiment” in accordance with the goals of the Singaporean state.⁵⁵

Migrant laborers are divided into two main categories: foreign workers and foreign talent. Foreign talents are highly educated and mobile professionals, while foreign workers are mostly domestic or construction workers of Southeast Asian origin (Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia).⁵⁶ The two groups are subject to different immigration and employment policies, with the former being granted a number of rights that the latter are not. For example, the “employment pass,” in the words of the Ministry of Manpower, “allows foreign professionals, managers, and executives to work in Singapore.”⁵⁷ Only holders of an employment pass could bring their family to Singapore—a privilege denied to other migrant workers

⁵⁴ Poon, “Pick and Mix for a Global City,” 70–71.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, “Employment Pass,” <http://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/employment-pass>.

who do not meet the minimum monthly salary of \$3,300. Foreign workers cannot even marry a Singaporean or become a permanent resident without the permission of the Ministry of Manpower. The government, by granting only qualified employment-pass holders the right to bring their family to the country, regulates the “dilution” of Singaporean culture.

On the other hand, low- and semi-skilled laborers (mostly of Southeast Asian descent) enjoy far fewer rights as “work permit” holders. Compared to “employment pass” holders, it is far more difficult for these laborers to assimilate because of the rules that they have to comply with and the rights that they are denied. Foreign domestic workers (numbering around 222,500) have been subject to a number of harsh regulations that prevent their integration into Singaporean society.⁵⁸ According to the 2005 Human Rights Watch Report, around 147 foreign domestic workers died on the job from 1999 to 2005—primarily due to suicide or accidents, with almost all of them having worked in unsafe environments, subject to physical violation and exploitation from their employers.⁵⁹

Racial tensions persist despite the government’s attempts to control and manage relations between migrants and citizens. For example, there have been a number of conflicts between foreign workers and Singaporeans in recent years. In November 2012, Singapore had its first strike in over 25 years, when 170 Chinese bus

⁵⁸ These women must undergo biannual medical check-ups that test for pregnancy and HIV infection. Women who test positive for either will almost always be deported. Moreover, these domestic workers are forced to put up a \$5,000 security bond that can be taken away by the employers. The threat of losing one’s security bond is used by the employer to inhibit the movements of maids. Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, “Foreign Work Force Numbers,” <http://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers>.

⁵⁹ *Human Rights Watch*, “Maid to Order,” 2005, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/12/06/maid-order>.

drivers from Mainland China led an illegal strike to protest disparities in wages between them and Singaporean drivers.⁶⁰ At the heart of this strike was resentment towards Singapore's treatment of low-skilled workers—the absence of a minimum wage requirement and minimal labor protection laws. A year later, in December 2013, a riot of around 500 people, mostly low-paid foreigners, was set off after a private bus killed an Indian national living in Little India. The 2013 riots were the most violent since the 1969 race riots.⁶¹ In 2014, Filipino migrants canceled their plan to hold Philippine Independence Day at Orchard Road, a famous shopping street, after a number of online complaints from Singaporeans. Anti-Filipino sentiments, according to Singaporean sociologist Tan Ern Ser, were fueled by the perception that Filipinos were “competitors for jobs in sales, services, or professions that Singaporeans would take up but preferably at higher wage levels.”⁶² In fact, many citizens feel some resentment towards “foreign talent” (skilled laborers with an employment pass) because the latter, in the words of Yeoh and Lin, “enjoy the all the privileges of living in Singapore with none of the responsibilities that citizens bear.”⁶³

Foreign labor has long been a contentious issue in domestic politics. The opposition parties have long criticized PAP for its policy of encouraging foreigners to work in Singapore. These

⁶⁰ Haroon Siddique, “Singapore’s First Strike in 25 years Shines Spotlight on Racial Tensions,” *The Guardian*, November 28, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/28/chinese-bus-drivers-strike-singapore>.

⁶¹ *The Guardian*, “Singapore Shocked by Worst riots in Decades, as Migrant Workers Vent Anger,” December 9, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/09/singapore-riots-decades-migrant-workers>.

⁶² Tessa Wong, “Unease in Singapore Over Filipino Workers,” *BBC News*, December 29, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-28953147>.

⁶³ Brenda Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, “Rapid Growth in Singapore’s Immigrant Population Brings Policy Challenges,” *Migration Policy Institute*, April 2012, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/rapid-growth-singapores-immigrant-population-brings-policy-challenges>.

criticisms have found some support among the populace. In fact, in the 2011 General Election, PAP lost the most number of seats to the opposition parties since independence. This may be the reason why, in 2013, the PAP-led government lowered the maximum permitted ratio of foreign workers to the total workforce of a company.⁶⁴ Despite these changes in policy, the opposition parties have continued to criticize the government. During a 2015 campaign rally, a leader of the Workers' Party, Low Thia Khiang, warned voters that “we might even see the day when Singaporeans become the minority.”⁶⁵

Thailand: Buddhism as Handmaiden of the State

In discussing racial and ethnic conflict in Thailand, we cannot ignore the central role of political Buddhism. The indigenous form of Buddhism is primarily *Theravāda*, i.e., the school of Buddhism perceived to hew closer to the original teachings of the Indian sage Siddhartha Gautama. Thailand's form of Buddhism has taken on some doctrinal syncretism with Hinduism, such as the belief in the dogma of *karma*, where actions have potential repercussions in a future life, and the *sakṭina*, a virtual caste system which directs

⁶⁴ Katherine Viscoti, “Few Jobs for Pinoys, Foreigners in Singapore,” *Rappler*, April 8 2012, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/25745-fewer-jobs-foreigners-singapore>.

⁶⁵ Peh Shing Huie, “As Singapore Prepares for Election, Immigration Remains Key Issue,” *South Morning China Post*, September 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1856539/singapore-prepares-election-immigration-remains-key-issue>. In reality, despite these attacks, PAP had its best performance since 2001 and was able to increase its share of the popular vote to 69.86 percent from 60.14 percent in 2011. The government's decision to lower the permitted ratio of foreign workers to the total workforce of a company in 2013 may be one reason why PAP was more successful in 2015 as compared to 2011. It is clear that the question of foreign labor has become a source of conflict in Singapore. The government has made some changes to its migrant policy as a result of anti-migrant sentiment, which has been invoked by many of the opposition groups. The challenge of the Singaporean government is to find a way to continue their policy of racial harmony amidst a growing tide of resentment towards foreigners.

people to accept their social standing but encourages them to perform acts of piety and virtue which will afford them a better standing in their next lives.⁶⁶ Subsequent reformations of Buddhist philosophy and theology (mostly driven by the sovereign kings of the then-Kingdom of Siam) did not sit well with the fundamentalists of the old tradition, which subsequently led to the latter questioning the very basis of the Siamese monarchy's power and to the Siamese state having to confront fundamentalist uprisings.⁶⁷

These conflicts eventually emboldened the Thai military and bureaucratic elite to wrest control of the Thai state from the monarch in the 1932 Revolution. Prime Minister Phibul Songgram subsequently attempted to secularize the Thai state and society during his leadership.⁶⁸ Phibul's complicity to Japanese imperialist designs during the Second World War, however, eventually led to King Bhumibol Adulyadej's (Rama IX) call for his ouster through the intervention of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1957. Sarit's authoritarian government was marked by the development of the Thai economy, which gave rise to a growing educated urban middle class and the reorganization of the Thai politico-economic elite.⁶⁹ At the same time, however, it also led to the exclusion of other less-affluent members of Thai society. These peoples eventually served as the base of the *sangha* (communities of Buddhist monks). The *sangha*, for their part, provided alternative spaces of contention, even if these groups were decidedly fundamentalist in their rhetoric and doctrinal approaches.⁷⁰ As such, Buddhism's major influence in the

⁶⁶ Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhist Politics and Their Revolutionary Origins in Thailand," *International Political Science Review* 10.2 (1989): 122–23.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 129–30.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 130–31.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 131–33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 133–35.

current layout of contemporary Thai politics cannot be exaggerated—if only because of its alleged complicity in legitimizing a nationalist state ideology. McCargo argues that, in reality, the “symbiotic relationship between the state and *sangha* has effectively limited Buddhism to the role of legitimating state power, and the universalistic teachings of Buddhism have been subordinated to nationalist ideology”⁷¹—a situation akin to having a dominant bloc which cultivates the relationship between state and non-state actors towards hegemonic conditions.⁷²

Due to this, the *sangha* are not entirely independent of the orthodox political hegemony, with “the result [being] a captured Buddhism, preoccupied with the preservation of orthodoxy and the maintenance of the established order.”⁷³ This has also led to their complicity in the promotion of a “‘radical Buddhist’ view of Thainess” that is “predicated upon a sense of threat, a feeling that Thai identity is endangered by the pervasive dominance of Western culture.”⁷⁴ Conditioned by a mistrust of foreign influences into Thai society, that has been given institutional currency, the rise of militant, fundamentalist Buddhism has also enabled intolerance towards non-mainstream Thai ethnic groups within the country. In this case, religious identity, when motivated by racism, may not necessarily be deployed by the religious groups themselves. Indeed, their relative marginalization in the political space makes them the tools of the state to consolidate its control over and against non-Thai Buddhist residents.

⁷¹ Duncan McCargo, “Buddhism, Democracy, and Identity in Thailand,” *Democratization* 11.4 (2004): 155.

⁷² Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, *In the Name of Civil Society: From Free Election Movements to People Power in the Philippines* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 21.

⁷³ McCargo, “Buddhism, Democracy, and Identity in Thailand,” 156.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

The primarily visible manifestation of racism in Thailand would be the discrimination against the Malay-speaking Muslims of southern Thailand. With a population of around 4,000,000 to 6,000,000 and sustaining 2,700 to 2,900 mosques, the Muslims of Thailand comprise the biggest religious minority.⁷⁵ These peoples comprise the majority populations in the Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, which were formerly part of the ancient Malay kingdom of Pattani,⁷⁶ which, in turn, was formerly within the Malay sphere of influence, then later fell under the rule of Siam in 1785, and then was internationally acknowledged under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909.⁷⁷ Societal and ethnocentric prejudices of the *Theravāda* Buddhist majority tended to “perceive Malay-Muslim men as lazy” and violent, primarily due to their continuing assertion of autonomy from the central government of Thailand. This negative relationship between the Buddhist majority and the Malay-speaking Muslims emboldened the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) to pursue “a quest to control potentially lucrative territory and enacting Islamic Shariah laws,”⁷⁸ which gave rise to a violent insurgency launched by Malay-speaking Muslim militants from the Muslim-dominated southern Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in January 2004. Both Buddhists and Muslims have died, several thousands have been injured, and schools, government buildings, nightclubs, Buddhist temples, railway stations, the airport

⁷⁵ Saroja Dorairajoo, “Peaceful Thai, Violent Malay(Muslim): A Case Study of the ‘Problematic’ Muslim Citizens of Southern Thailand,” *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 27.2 (2009): 63.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁷ “Treaty between Great Britain and Siam: Signed at Bangkok, March 10, 1909,” *The American Journal of International Law* 3.4 (1909): 297–304.

⁷⁸ Richard S. Ehrlich, “South Asian Muslims Blame Racism for Attacks by Buddhists,” *The Washington Times*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/may/16/south-asian-muslims-blame-racism-attacks-buddhists>.

in the major southern city of Hatyai, police stations and houses of private citizens have been torched or bombed. Drive-by shootings, killings using bombs, and beheadings are common methods of execution practiced by the aggressors who have included predominantly Muslim insurgents as well as members of the armed security forces who carry out retaliation killings.⁷⁹

As of 2013, it is believed that the casualty has exceeded 5,000 on both Buddhist and Muslim sides, with “foreign civil rights advocates accus[ing] Thailand’s US-trained troops of illegal executions, torture and other abuses of Muslim activists and rebels.”⁸⁰

Myanmar’s 969 and “the War on the Rohingya”

With the population of Myanmar (also still known by its traditional name of Burma) being comprised primarily of 89 percent practicing *Theravāda* Buddhists, Burmese identity has been taken for granted as primarily Buddhist. This identification of Buddhism with the country’s indigenous identity ensured its predominance and popular acceptance (even during the period of colonization by the British from 1824 to 1948).⁸¹ In contrast to Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism has never been subjected to internal doctrinal conflict. Its proximity towards state power and its political prominence has entrenched its position as being part of the dominant bloc, subsequently coloring its re-emergence in contemporary Burmese politics. The “Saffron Revolution” of August 2007 remains a high point of Buddhist participation in

⁷⁹ Dorairajoo, “Peaceful Thai, Violent Malay(Muslim),” 63.

⁸⁰ Ehrlich, “South Asian Muslims Blame Racism for Attacks by Buddhists.”

⁸¹ Buddha Dharma Education Association (BDEA), “Buddhism in Myanmar,” *Buddhist Studies: The Buddhist World*, last modified December 5, 2013, <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/burma-txt.htm>.

political activity and the democratization movement in Myanmar, where “a massive increase in fuel prices sparked initial protests, which were joined later that month by thousands of Buddhist monks, and gained the support of Burmese citizens throughout the country.”⁸² Simultaneous to its entrenchment in Burmese society, however, Buddhism in Myanmar is swiftly being characterized by millenarian fundamentalism, allegedly characterized by a widespread belief that Buddhism will disappear in the future. . . . This millenarianism can be traced to a scripturally unsupported but widely believed “prophecy” that Buddhism will disappear 5,000 years after the Buddha’s passing. As 1956 is considered the halfway point, the belief is that Buddhism is now declining irreversibly.

The collapse of state support for Buddhism following British colonization, the colonial government’s tacit support for Christian missionaries and the large influx of migrant labor from British India created a sense of religious and demographic encroachment, fueling millenarian narratives which culminated in the 1930s Saya San rebellion.⁸³

This fear of “religious encroachment” was subsequently deployed against the Muslim minority of Myanmar, the latter having experienced only minimal integration immediately after independence was declared from Britain in 1948. While Muslims indeed “held many senior government positions” in postcolonial Burma, these gains were reversed in 1962 “when the military seized power and stymied the hiring and promoting of Muslim officials.

⁸² Oxford Burma Alliance, “The Saffron Revolution,” <http://www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/saffron-revolution.html>.

⁸³ Kyaw San Wai, “Myanmar’s Religious Violence: A Buddhist ‘Siege Mentality’ at Work,” *RSIS Commentaries* 37 (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2014), 1.

The military drew on popular prejudices that Muslims dominated business and used their profits to build mosques, buy Buddhist wives, and spread Islamic teachings.”⁸⁴ These negative stereotypes against the Muslim minorities would later fuel anti-Muslim hate propaganda. It is thus in this context that the Rohingya became the perfect scapegoat for Burmese Buddhist fundamentalism.

The ethnic and social history of the Rohingya has been subject to continuing contention and revision both by the Myanmar government’s partisans and scholars attempting to set the record straight. It can be agreed, however, that the Rohingyas “date back to the beginning of the 7th century when Arab Muslim traders settled in Arakan. The vast majority of Rohingyas live in the Rakhine state, a geographically-isolated area in western Myanmar consisting of coastal plains and a network of streams and rivers.”⁸⁵ There are claims “that Rohingyas have lived in Myanmar for centuries and they are the descendants of Muslim Arabs, Moors, Persians, Turks, Mughals, and Bengalis who came mostly as traders, warriors, and saints through overland and sea-route. On the other hand, the general perception of the Myanmar people is that Rohingyas are Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh. It must be noted here that there are other Muslims across Myanmar who are not Rohingyas.”⁸⁶ Imtiaz Ahmed’s reconstruction of events during the 19th and 20th century sheds light on the Rohingyas’ relationship with the Buddhist majority:

⁸⁴ Andrew C. Marshall, “Myanmar Gives Official Blessing to Anti-Muslim Monks,” *The 2014 Pulitzer Prize International Reporting*, June 27, 2013, <http://www.pulitzer.org/works/2014-International-Reporting>.

⁸⁵ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Rohingya Muslims: Myanmar’s Forgotten People,” *RSIS Commentaries* 12 (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2008), 1.

⁸⁶ Nehginpao Kipgen, “Conflict in Rakhine State in Myanmar: Rohingya Muslims’ Conundrum,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 33.2 (2013), 300.

It has been alleged that the British annexed the Rakhine region in 1824 . . . Put differently, the British annexation of the Arakan encouraged a steady movement of population from the west to the east—that is, from Bengal or India to the Arakan. A testimony of this lies in the fact that the population of Maungdaw Township increased from 18,000 in 1831 to about 100,000 in 1911.

The fate and political position of the Arakanese Muslims otherwise became closely tied up with the British colonial power. Not surprisingly, therefore, when the Japanese occupied Burma in 1942 and expelled the British from the Arakan, a sizeable section of the Arakanese Muslims fled Burma and the Arakan and took shelter in Bengal. Indeed, it was during this period that the political affiliations of the Arakanese became clear, with the Arakanese Buddhists supporting the Japanese while the Arakanese Muslims supporting the British. Such political affiliation, however, proved fatal for the Arakanese Muslims . . . [A]t the time of Burma's independence, the Rohingyas not only formed their own army but also approached the "Father" of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, "asking him to incorporate Northern Arakan into East Pakistan." The Rohingyas continued with their demands even in the 1950s. The new state of Burma had no other choice but to consider them as non-Burmese and dissidents who were bent on wrecking the territorial integrity of the country."⁸⁷

These allegations were further fueled by allegations that radical elements among the Rohingyas went on to establish the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), an armed organization primarily based in Bangladesh and in league with the global Muslim terrorist

⁸⁷ Imtiaz Ahmed, "Globalization, Low-Intensity Conflict & Protracted Statelessness/Refugeehood: The Plight of The Rohingyas," *GSC Quarterly* 13 (2004), 13–14.

network Al-Qaeda.⁸⁸ With the “justifications” of national sovereignty and religious fundamentalism seemingly intersecting, the stage has thus been set to complicate Myanmar’s attempts at transitioning towards a democratic form of government through the imposition of conservative Buddhist fundamental groups.

The 2012 riots in Rakhine, sparked by accusations regarding the alleged rape and murder of a Buddhist woman by Rohingya men, became the pretext for further repression against the Rohingya Muslims, ending with “dozens... killed in the fighting, and 75,000 fled, most of them Muslims.”⁸⁹ The 969 Movement, an organization named after “the nine attributes of the Buddha, the six attributes of his teachings, and the nine attributes of the *Sangha*, or monastic order”⁹⁰ became active around 2013. Led by Wirathu, a Buddhist monk notorious for instigating anti-Muslim pogroms in 2003 (and jailed until 2010 for it),⁹¹ the movement has received support from Myanmar’s government officials, most notably President Thein Sein and Minister for Religious Affairs Sann Sint (in part due to the Burmese military junta’s efforts towards “co-opting Buddhism . . . to tame rebellious monks and repair its image”).⁹² The systemic use of violence against the Rohingya, as recounted in the beginning of this narrative, has led to their bid for asylum in other countries in Asia, leading to the current Rohingya refugee crisis enveloping ASEAN. The conflict has escalated further in 2016, leading to the burning

⁸⁸ Bertil Lintner, “Bangladesh: Breeding Ground for Muslim Terror,” *Asia Times Online*, September 21, 2002, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/DI21Df06.html.

⁸⁹ Mark McDonald, “As Violence Continues, Rohingya Find Few Defenders in Myanmar,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 2012, <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/31/as-violence-continues-rohingya-find-few-defenders-in-myanmar>.

⁹⁰ Alex Bookbidner, “969: The Strange Numerological Basis for Burma’s Religious Violence,” *The Atlantic*, April 9, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/969-the-strange-numerological-basis-for-burmas-religious-violence/274816>.

⁹¹ Hannah Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror,” *TIME*, July 1, 2013.

⁹² Marshall, “Myanmar Gives Official Blessing to Anti-Muslim Monks.”

down of mosques by Burmese mobs—with state security forces unwilling to prosecute.⁹³

The Philippines: Bangsamoro and the Contradictions of State-Building

Given the country's relatively significant ethnic heterogeneity, the Philippines' demographics do not inspire as much ethnic or racial coherence,⁹⁴ at least not on a systemic or state level. The fight for a Bangsamoro nation in Mindanao is arguably the most prominent and lasting ethnic tension in the country's history. The Bangsamoro struggle originated from the Muslim Mindanaoans' non-inclusion from the country's colonial history and its subsuming under the post-Second World War national territory. While the largest ethnic group in the Philippines is the Christian Tagalogs, many other ethnic groups in the country have taken to Catholic Christianity. This condition can be attributed to Spain's missionary efforts at the time of its imperialistic expansion. Before the Spanish conquest, Muslim populations were concentrated in the southern islands in Mindanao, particularly Tawi-Tawi, Cotabato, and Sulu, where the first supra-barangay system was located. While the Spanish occupation firmly consolidated power in Luzon and Visayas, their military assaults and expeditions were unsuccessful in subduing the Muslim populations.⁹⁵ Thus, the Muslim population did not feel a connection to the label "Filipino"—even as the Philippines emerged as an independent nation-state after the Philippine Revolution in 1898.

⁹³ *Al Jazeera*, "Mob Burns Down Mosque in Myanmar," July 2, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/mob-burns-mosque-myanmar-160702100230049.html>.

⁹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (Pasig City: Anvil, 2003).

⁹⁵ Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 44–45.

In contrast, the American occupation had a more direct engagement with Mindanao under a brief military rule (1899–1913). Besides military force, the American regime utilized “scientific” and ethnographic means⁹⁶ to cast the Moro as the primitive and exotic native, contrasting the Moro with the “civilized” metropolitan Christian.⁹⁷ During the American Commonwealth, the term Filipino became synonymous with “Christians natives” as the Muslims were registered as “savages” in the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes.⁹⁸ This dichotomy has had a significant influence in the framing of contemporary socio-political conflicts.

The American construct of the “Moro” seeped into national consciousness well into the subsequent independent Philippine Republic. The imposed political identity in the new democratic political structure reduced the agency of Muslim Mindanao. Furthermore, the new land policies legitimized the land-grabbing of untitled ancestral lands, driving off the Muslims from their home towns.⁹⁹ The constant systemic abuse motivated the Muslim elite and intellectuals to create an alternative narrative known as the Bangsamoro (“Muslim nation”). It rests on the argument that Mindanao’s position of socio-economic exclusion rooting from centuries of political isolation from Luzon and Visayas¹⁰⁰ makes it

⁹⁶ Michael Hawkins, *Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines’ Muslim South* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2013), 10.

⁹⁷ Christopher Alan Vaughan, “Obfuscating a New Other, Defining a New Self: Popular Discourses on the Colonization of the Philippines,” dissertation, Berkeley, University of California (1997), 158.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Lualhati M. Abreu, “Colonialism and Resistance: A Historical Perspective,” in *The MORO READER: History and Contemporary Struggles of the Bangsamoro People*, ed. Bobby M. Tuazon (Quezon City: CenPEG Publications, 2008), 17.

¹⁰⁰ For a thorough scholarly discussion of such a position, see Rizal G. Buendia, “Mindanao Conflict in the Philippines: Ethno-Religious War or Economic Conflict?” in *The Politics of Death: Political Violence in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aurel Croissant, Beate Martin, and Sascha Kneip (Berlin: Lit Verlag Berlin, 2006), 147–87.

incompatible with the Philippine nation-state—and should therefore be separated from the rest of the country. This was crystalized in Nur Misuari's establishment of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1972, the main organization pushing for self-determination utilizing both political and armed means.¹⁰¹ Among the reasons cited for the separatist struggle was the 1968 Jabidah Massacre, where 180 Tausugs from Sulu, allegedly recruited under President Ferdinand Marcos's orders for guerrilla warfare against Sabah and Brunei (predominantly Muslim countries), were summarily killed by the Armed Forces of the Philippines.¹⁰²

Although it constituted a significant threat to the government—to the extent that it was used as a justification for the declaration of Martial Law in 1972—the Bangsamoro movement proved to be unstable, experienced multiple internal ruptures. Buendia labels the movement as a brand of “reactive nationalism” fueled by immediate crises, rather than by long-term nation-building,¹⁰³ and views it as more of a political instrumentalization of the Muslim identity by the Mindanaoan elite for material economic gains.¹⁰⁴ Even under the common ethno-religious identity of Islam, Mindanao Muslims remained divided into thirteen ethno-linguistic groups, with very little in common.¹⁰⁵ In addition to this division, non-Muslim indigenous groups collectively classified as *lumads* argue that they have also been victimized by the separatist wars launched by the

¹⁰¹ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, 217.

¹⁰² Alfred McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 390.

¹⁰³ Rizal G. Buendia, “The State-Moro Armed Conflict in the Philippines: Unresolved National Question or Question of Governance?” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 13.1 (2005): 109–38.

¹⁰⁴ Rizal G. Buendia, *The Politics of Ethnicity and Moro Secessionism in the Philippines* (Perth: Murdoch University and Asia Research Centre, 2007).

¹⁰⁵ Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 41.

Muslim combatants. Indeed, claims made by the MNLF to ancestral domains have also been contested by the *lumad* groups, criticizing the MNLF for its lack of sensitivity and solidarity to the *lumad* plight in its political struggle.¹⁰⁶

Peace and emancipation, Magdalena argues, demanded that both the Philippine government and the Bangsamoro movement create a space where Mindanao's inhabitants can "engage the capitalist world with a viable development agenda apart from living solely in the world of Islam."¹⁰⁷ In ensuring that Mindanao as a whole finally catches up to the growth rate of the entire Philippines, its natural resources and population would be able to serve as a "frontier" for inclusive development¹⁰⁸—especially considering the fact that the exploitation of Mindanao's natural resources has been primarily conducted by transnational corporations.¹⁰⁹

With autonomy in Muslim Mindanao concretized through the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1989, questions have been raised regarding the credibility of its institutional consolidation—particularly in relation to the *lumads* and other non-Muslim groups residing in contested areas. ARMM's establishment reflected the overreach of the MNLF in claiming its constituency. Out of the thirteen provinces and nine cities covered by the plebiscite mandated by the organic act establishing the ARMM,¹¹⁰ only four provinces joined the ARMM: Lanao del Sur,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 127–29.

¹⁰⁷ Federico V. Magdalena, "Configuring the Mindanao Peace Process: Implications for Development and Globalization," *The Mindanao Forum* 25.1 (2012), 80.

¹⁰⁸ Patricio Abinales, *Orthodoxy and History in the Muslim-Mindanao Narrative* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 154–55.

¹⁰⁹ InPeace Mindanao, *Undermining Patrimony: The Large-Scale Mining Plunder in Mindanao* (Quezon City: Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, 2014), 41.

¹¹⁰ Section 1, Article II, Republic Act No. 6734, "An Act Providing for an Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao," Republic of the Philippines (1989).

Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi¹¹¹—less than half of the areas claimed by the MNLF. A subsequent plebiscite for expanding its territories in 2001 (covering the entire eastern part of Mindanao)¹¹² was rejected by an overwhelming majority of the covered areas, with only the province of Basilan and Marawi City joining the ARMM.¹¹³

The mismanagement and lack of coherent governance of the ARMM by the reintegrated MNLF leadership (especially its chairman, Misuari) eventually gave way to Manila's intervention in ARMM politics since 2001.¹¹⁴ The policy was crystalized in President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's backing of the powerful Ampatuan political family in Maguindanao, which served as her local political machinery within the period of 2004 to the end of Arroyo's tenure.¹¹⁵ Disgruntled elements of the MNLF broke ranks from Misuari's dwindling power base to defect to a rival group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Existing since the late 1980s, the MILF supposedly aimed to establish a purely-Islamic community through its own armed forces, Sharia courts, prisons, and educational systems.¹¹⁶ It tried to balance its armed presence with its presumably moderate politics, never coming into all-out conflict with the Philippine government, their erstwhile comrades in the MNLF, and troops from the United States of America participating in the "Balikatan" joint war exercises—and even steered clear of

¹¹¹ Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), "ARMM History," 2013, <http://www.armm.gov.ph/history>.

¹¹² Republic Act No. 9054, "An Act to Strengthen and Expand the Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Amending for the Purpose Republic Act No. 6734, Entitled 'An Act Providing for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao,' as Amended," Republic of the Philippines (2001).

¹¹³ ARMM, "ARMM History."

¹¹⁴ Abinales, *Orthodoxy and History in the Muslim-Mindanao Narrative*, 149–51.

¹¹⁵ Paul Hutchcroft, "The Arroyo Imbroglio in the Philippines," *Journal of Democracy* 19.1 (2008): 150.

¹¹⁶ Abinales, *Orthodoxy and History in the Muslim-Mindanao Narrative*, 113–15.

directly engaging terrorist organizations such as the Abu Sayyaf.¹¹⁷ It also managed to establish a non-government organization, the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), whose projects are actually supported by the Philippine government.¹¹⁸

It is primarily due to this palatable reputation maintained by the MILF that the Philippine government chose to enter peace talks with it, culminating in the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB), which recognized the necessity of establishing working systems of governance in the ARMM for ensuring peace.¹¹⁹ The FAB was further institutionalized by the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB)¹²⁰ on March 27, 2014, and the submission of the draft of a proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) by President Benigno Aquino III to the Philippine Congress in September 10, 2014.¹²¹

The BBL underwent legislative debates since the latter part of 2014—then significantly derailed in January 25, 2015, when elements of the Special Action Force (SAF) of the Philippine National Police (on a mission to capture Zulkifli bin Hir, a.k.a. Marwan, an alleged affiliate of the global terrorist network Al-Qaeda) encountered the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), a splinter group from the MILF, protecting Marwan.¹²² The

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹¹⁹ The Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), “The Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro,” October 15, 2012, <http://www.gov.ph/2014/10/15/the-framework-agreement-on-the-bangsamoro/>.

¹²⁰ GRP and MILF, “The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro,” March 27, 2014, <http://www.gov.ph/2014/03/27/document-cab/>.

¹²¹ Andreo Calanzo. “PNoy Personally Submits Draft Bangsamoro Law to Congress Leaders,” *GMA News Online*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/378481/news/nation/pnoy-personally-submits-draft-bangsamoro-law-to-congress-leaders>.

¹²² Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), *IPAC Report No. 17: Killing Marwan in Mindanao*, March 5 (Jakarta: Foundation for Preventing International Crises, 2015), 1, 11.

encounter left forty-four casualties among the SAF personnel, seventeen BIFF and MILF fighters, and at least seven civilians caught in the crossfire.¹²³ The violent encounter compromised the stability of the negotiation process and the presumption of good faith between the Philippine government and the MILF, with both houses of Congress (the House of Representatives¹²⁴ and the Philippine Senate¹²⁵) subjecting the BBL to further deliberations and modifications, to the disappointment of the MILF and other advocates for peace in Mindanao. With the 16th Congress of the Philippines having declared adjournment in February 3, 2016, hopes for passing the BBL under Aquino's administration were brought to a close.¹²⁶

Above and Beyond “Racial Clash”

Across the five cases discussed, we see two types of conflict brought about by the imposition of state policy: (1) ethnic conflicts arising from potential deviations from a country's cultural norms, and (2) ethnic conflicts rooted in socio-economic competition. As the five cases show, these are not mutually exclusive. More often than not, these types of clashes either reinforce or give rise to each other, whichever comes first in a country's social makeup.

¹²³ *Rappler*, “At least 17 MILF Fighters Die in Mamasapano Clash,” January 31, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/82518-milf-fatalities-maguindanao-clash>.

¹²⁴ D. J. Yap, “House passes proposed BBL, 50–17,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 21, 2015, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/692631/house-passes-proposed-bbl-50-17>.

¹²⁵ Christina Mendez, “Senate Sets New Timeline for BBL Approval,” *Philippine Star*, August 4, 2015, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2015/08/04/1484327/senate-sets-new-timeline-bbl-approval>.

¹²⁶ Lira Dalangin-Fernandez, “HOPES CRUSHED | Congress Adjourns; It's Requiem for Pension Hike, BBL, FOI, SSL-4,” *Interaksyon*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.interaksyon.com/article/123638/hopes-crushed--congress-adjourns-its-requiem-for-pension-hike-bbl-foi-ssl-4>.

The discriminatory policies of the predominantly Buddhist countries against their Muslim minorities (Thailand and Burma), to some extent, foreshadows the restrictions imposed by Singapore upon their migrant workers. Despite having been part of the social and economic life of their countries, minorities continue to be potential prime suspects to any state pushing for socio-cultural uniformity—the latter becoming scapegoats that could be easily persecuted, dispossessed, and subjected to state-sanctioned violence.

Being similarly isolated socio-culturally from the “Christianized” majority within their country, the Moro and *lumad* communities of Mindanao have also been subjected to state measures limiting their actual autonomy or political power. The passage of the BBL and the establishment of a new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region were viewed as vital corrective measures to such historical imbalances. The MILF commissioned the BDA to write the projected region’s development plan, based on the institutional powers accorded it in the draft BBL. The Bangsamoro Development Plan (BDP) assembles a set of policies for governance designed to ensure the “promotion of economic growth, equal access to employment and livelihood opportunities, human capacity development, and elimination of social and economic inequities”¹²⁷ within Muslim Mindanao. The BDP intends the Bangsamoro to establish closer economic links with other Muslim majority economies in Southeast Asia—to a greater extent than is currently pursued by the Philippine government. The potential of such economic linkages putting the national government’s sovereignty to test has been subjected to

¹²⁷ Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), *Bangsamoro Development Plan* (Bangsamoro Development Agency: Cotabato City, 2015), x.

question, and has colored less-optimistic appraisals of Bangsamoro autonomy.¹²⁸

When a nation-building ideology develop towards a homogenous narrative, it is likely to gloss over the actual ethnic composition of a society. Despite being primarily a heterogeneous society since its inception, Singaporean social consolidation has also given way to the pursuit of segregation—albeit one purportedly based less on race and ethnicity but more on economic and meritocratic terms. Singaporean citizens and migrants, in this scheme, are partitioned between “residents” who represent the Singaporean state’s priorities, while its migrants are treated as potential destabilizing elements. In its attempt to become globally competitive while, at the same time, upholding “racial stability,” Singapore systemically excludes certain groups of people from assimilation. The same dual policy could be observed in how race continues to determine Malaysian national identity. Despite the clear prominence of Islam as a cultural marker

¹²⁸ The Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) has already been subjected to much criticism involving the constitutionality of its institutional provisions. The biggest criticism has been floated by Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago, who suggested that the BBL takes over political and administrative powers that are only allocated by the 1987 Constitution to the Office of the President, as well as violating constitutional provisions over natural resources. For examples of her statements, see Miriam Defensor-Santiago, “Miriam: Bangsamoro Agreement Unconstitutional,” commencement speech at Gordon College in Olongapo City, 2 April 2012, http://www.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2014/0402_santiago1.asp, and “Transcript of the interview with Sen. Miriam Defensor Santiago,” March 5, 2015, http://www.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2015/0305_santiago1.asp. For the BDP’s part, the BDA hosted (together with the University of the Philippines Asian Center and the Institute of Islamic Studies) a round-table discussion on the BDP at the University of the Philippines-Diliman Campus last May 22, 2015, which publicized the salient provisions of the BDP to a consortium of academics, civil society groups, policy advocates from all over the Philippines. Discussions have been floated on the contentious economic frameworks employed by the BDP and its writers (with some attendees suggesting that they are not entirely dissimilar to the faulty policies of the ARMM under the MNLF). In particular, the suggestion of the BDP’s advocates that the Bangsamoro’s plan of engaging in the trade of *halal* products in Muslim countries within ASEAN would be very useful, but has been met by criticism of certain faculty from the UP School of Economics suggesting that this may destabilize the current nature and competitive work advantages of the residents of the Bangsamoro territories. From the personal notes by the authors.

in Malaysian society, PAS continues to struggle against UMNO, which remains as the dominant political party. The voting populace continues to prefer UMNO's incorporation of Islam and ethnic identity rather than PAS's push for a predominantly Islamic state.¹²⁹

The influx of migrants (both talents and workers) that will be brought about by the ASEAN integration can (and will) further aggravate racial tensions in Singapore. Many of the Southeast Asian laborers who migrate to Singapore will be employed as "work permit" holders who would likely protest the discriminatory treatment they may regularly experience. Similarly, Singaporean citizens may resent the new migrants for "taking" their jobs at a lower wage, which would mirror anti-migrant sentiments in Europe and the USA. (For that matter, this may have likewise been the main point of contention by the Thais and the Burmese against their Muslim minorities). As it stands, a large number of the "work permit" holders are from ASEAN member-states such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.¹³⁰

If ASEAN's plans push through, more skilled laborers from other ASEAN countries would probably migrate to Singapore. These "foreign talents" may then be resented by the local population for having relatively good jobs and "enjoying" the privileges of living in the country without having the responsibilities of a citizen. The freer flow of laborers in Southeast Asia could inflame racial tensions not only in Singapore, but also in the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, and the other countries with existing

¹²⁹ Patricia A. Martinez, "The Islamic state or the state of Islam in Malaysia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23.3 (2001): 474–503.

¹³⁰ According to the ILO, more than 18 percent of intra-ASEAN migration is from Indonesia and Malaysia to Singapore alone.

volatile ethnic relationships, and undermine the member-states' attempts to manage race relations within the country. Of course, whether the plans for the free movement of laborers and the hope of promoting more heterogeneous ASEAN societies will actually materialize would depend on the actual power ASEAN wields vis-à-vis the nation-states. As we will illustrate, the prospects are not promising.

The Institutional Baggage

The difference in ASEAN's structure vis-à-vis the EU, plus the absence of checks and balances between the ASEAN Secretariat and the heads-of-state, paves the way for limited accountability and critical policy-making within the ASEAN, especially when taking into account the actual consistency and impact of regional agreements to realities on the ground. With ASEAN supposedly "legitimat[ing] the pursuit of state-led economic development and political consolidation,"¹³¹ it gave a virtual *carte blanche* to most of the member-states in ASEAN to "erod[e] autonomous associations and integrat[e] heterogeneous populations into a collective enterprise mobilized towards economic goals"¹³² — virtually ignoring the dissonance between the principles of regional unification and existing national policies. If we take into account how the cases in this study were driven by socio-economic conflicts coinciding with ethnic and religious prejudices, the regional project's credibility is being seriously undermined.

¹³¹ David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith, *ASEAN and East Asian International Relations: Regional Delusion* (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2006), 46.

¹³² *Ibid.*

The contradictions of ASEAN's regional integration project, were probably best illustrated by the existing Rohingya question. With due fairness, it must be said that Southeast Asian politicians and governments attempted to address the role of state, regional, and transnational actors in Asia in the Rohingya crisis, and how they might be able to find a satisfactory solution to this long-standing issue. A meeting was called in May 20, 2015, by the foreign ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand in Putrajaya, Malaysia,¹³³ followed by the Thai government's "Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean" held last May 29 in Bangkok.¹³⁴

The Bangkok event, it must be noted, was attended by a majority of the member nation-states of ASEAN: Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand. The three Foreign Ministers, Datuk Seri Anifah Aman (Malaysia), General Tanasak Patimapragorn (Thailand), and Retno Marsudi (Indonesia) promised that they "remain committed to working closely with affected countries and members of the international community in resolving the issue in the region,"¹³⁵ and the Bangkok Special Meeting declared two policies on "Immediate Response: Protection of People Stranded at Sea" and "Comprehensive Prevention of Irregular Migration, Smuggling of Migrants, and Trafficking in Persons."¹³⁶ These policy responses and proclamations,

¹³³ Khairunnisa Kasnoon, "Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia in Talks of Irregular Movement of People," *Astro Awani*, May 20, 2015, <http://english.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/malaysia-thailand-indonesia-talks-irregular-movement-people-60320>.

¹³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, "Press Release: Summary of Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean," May 29, 2015, <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/media-center/14/56880-Summary-Special-Meeting-on-Irregular-Migration-in.html>.

¹³⁵ *Straits Times*, "Foreign Ministers from Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia Discuss Human Trafficking," May 20, 2015, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/foreign-ministers-from-malaysia-thailand-indonesia-discuss-human-trafficking>.

¹³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, "Press Release: Summary of Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean."

however, were criticized over their omissions. The May 29 meet in Bangkok was lambasted for “sidestepping using the term ‘Rohingya’” to refer to the aforementioned refugees at the heart of this controversy, in deference to Myanmar representative Htein Lin’s adamant refusal to acknowledge the Rohingya as an ethnic group in their country.¹³⁷ The most pointed critique, perhaps would be the statement of Charles Santiago, Chairperson of APHR and Malaysian Member of Parliament:

It’s just another case of ASEAN doing as ASEAN does: lots of talk with little genuine substance or resolve to take any action whatsoever on the root causes of this crisis. The meeting’s failure to openly discuss the desperate conditions and systematic human rights violations suffered by the Rohingya population is tantamount to complicity in the crimes being committed against them. A country responsible for human rights violations cannot just veto any discussion of them in an open meeting. Myanmar’s policies are aimed at “cleansing” the country of the Rohingya population, pure and simple: the government even admits to it itself. Can we really allow them to dictate that we can’t talk about it? Calling it an elephant in the room doesn’t even begin to do it justice.¹³⁸

These sentiments were echoed across commentaries on the Southeast Asian nations’ response on the Rohingya crisis. The Associated Press and Agence France-Press released a joint analysis claiming that ASEAN’s credibility is currently at risk “given the

¹³⁷ Simon Roughneen, “‘Rohingya’ Taboo at 17-Nation Meeting,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, May 29, 2015, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Rohingya-taboo-at-17-nation-meeting>.

¹³⁸ ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), “Bangkok Meeting a Failure as Delegates Avoid Discussion of Key Issues in Regional Migrant Crisis,” *Prachatai English*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/5110>.

global attention the crisis is getting and the possibility that many migrants could die if no country takes [the Rohingya] in,” noting further that “some cracks in [ASEAN]’s bedrock principle of non-interference have appeared.”¹³⁹ Motokazu Matsui warns that “Myanmar may again find itself diplomatically isolated if it fails to properly address the plight of the Rohingya,” pointedly asking why Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Myanmar’s opposition movement National League for Democracy, has remained silent on the issue.¹⁴⁰ Most tellingly, the Burmese Rohingya Association in Thailand complained about their being left out of the proceedings in an event addressing their very fate.¹⁴¹

Conclusion: What Integration?

The present study, it must be admitted, has only begun attempting a region-wide assessment of ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia. As it is, we have still not covered the cases and conditions of ethnic and racial discrimination within other ASEAN countries, as listed below:

- *Laos*: State-sanctioned discrimination and brutal military suppression against the indigenous Hmong
- *Cambodia*: Institutional and professional discrimination deployed against Vietnamese immigrants and African-Americans working in the country

¹³⁹ *The Japan Times*, “Rohingya Crisis Highlights Toothless Nature of ASEAN,” May 20, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/05/20/asia-pacific/rohingya-crisis-highlights-toothless-nature-asean>.

¹⁴⁰ Motokazu Matsui, “Rohingya Exodus Threatens Stability of Southeast Asia,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, May 18, 2015, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Rohingya-exodus-threatens-stability-of-Southeast-Asia>.

¹⁴¹ Chris Blake, “Asian Nations Avoid Myanmar Criticism in Pledge to Help Migrants,” *Bloomberg Business*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-05-29/asian-nations-avoid-myanmar-criticism-in-pledge-to-help-migrants>.

- *Vietnam*: Institutionalized discrimination of its Kinh majority against Khmer immigrants
- *Indonesia*: Contemporary discriminations against Chinese and African-Americans, as well as the genocide which gave birth to Timorese independence movement, culminating in the establishment of East Timor.
- *Brunei*: Introduction of policies promoting cultural hegemony (such as the imposition of the Sharia Penal Code even on non-Muslims).

It might appear that the ASEAN member-states in general share a predisposition to institutionalized ethnic discrimination—and this has informed the fact that almost all of them are guilty of violating the human rights of minority ethnic groups within their territories (except for East Timor, itself not yet a full member of ASEAN, whose very identity is built under the crux of resistance to Indonesian discrimination). It also does not help that, considering the constituencies subjected to discrimination, the ASEAN member-nations are basically visiting the same injuries they have endured on each other. It also continues to color the double-faced relationship they have with the regional project, with Jones and Smith offering a cutting assessment of its perennial shortcomings: “[A]s economic deals and security agreements within and outside the region occur increasingly on a bilateral or trilateral basis, which practically refutes the notion of an integrated economic and security community, Asia’s regional groupings begin to look rather less than the sum of their parts.”¹⁴²

¹⁴² Jones and Smith, *ASEAN and East Asian International Relations*, 228.

How, then, do we reconcile the call for regional integration when even ASEAN nation-states' structures fail to integrate its marginalized groups? While discussing ASEAN's institutional capacities are beyond the scope of this study, it is perhaps appropriate for us to point out certain uncomfortable realities that need addressing.

If significant sections of the member countries' population do not share the ideal of cross-national integration of the ASEAN Secretariat, it is perhaps necessary that ASEAN as an institution first establish a proper parallel constituency, and not simply rely on the munificence of its member-states' governments. Public antipathy and plain ignorance about ASEAN's structures, identity, and governance apparatuses—apart from the region's socio-economic elite and major stakeholders—parallel the growth of anti-EU sentiment in Europe, albeit in a radically different fashion. The only difference is that whereas the EU's role is increasingly growing in determining a country's national policy (and perceived to be encroaching upon national sovereignty), ASEAN can't even begin to affect its member nation-states' intransigence beyond a miniscule amount of its youth and the bureaucratic elite.

ASEAN's state and capital-centric regional governance poses important questions on the democratic credibility of the project, as the tragic condition of the Rohingya and many other indigent groups suffering the same conditions illustrate. While it is currently beyond the scope of this study to offer concrete policy solutions, we can point out that ASEAN will not succeed in integration if it continues to prioritize money and trade—with political and cultural exchange left to empty rhetoric. Multiculturalism, the strongest factor that may salvage the regional integration project, only works if it is made and deployed by peoples with social, cultural, and political

solidarity—not exclusive economic agreements. It is our belief that while there are very high hurdles to be overcome, regional cooperation and solidarity is still possible. It can, however, only become real if ASEAN’s member-countries will acknowledge that if they are to be allowed to protect their interests, they must enjoin and ensure other countries to do so as well.

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