Diversity, inclusivity and governance in the social landscape of Southeast Asia

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The social landscape of Southeast Asia today is marked by diversity at all levels and registers, from cultural-linguistic to religio-ethnic, and it has always been so.

A cursory look at the socio-economic-cultural landscape of Southeast Asia in the past will point to how the region—as a result of its geographical position, its terrestrial geography and its demography—has always been open and receptive to external cultural influences. Located precisely between the greater Asian landmasses of South Asia and East Asia, Southeast Asia has been the recipient of cultural-linguistic and economic influences from both the Indian subcontinent and China.[1] In the de-

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1. Charles Hirschman and Sabrina Bonaparte, "Population and society in Southeast Asia: a historical perspective", *Demographic change in South-*

velopment of its native local cultures, there has always been the eclectic mixing of India and Chinese cultural influences, which is apparent until today. In the ancient architecture of the region we can see vivid and solid traces of contact with India.[2] The temple-complexes of Bayan, Angkor, Pagan, Ayudhaya, Prambanan and Borobudur all point to a time when Southeast Asia was largely Indic in terms of its cultural character, and where its material culture was deeply influenced as a result of contact with India and Sri Lanka.

In terms of the languages that are spoken today and which remain the mother-tongue of millions of Southeast Asians, the Khmer, Thai, Burmese, Malay, Indonesian and other native languages of the region bear the same etymological roots as Sanskrit, as well as common scripts. Furthermore, as any visitor to the region will readily observe, the myths and epics of the Indian subcontinent are still the most popular forms of vernacular culture that are known and recognised among Southeast Asians until today—a testimony to the long period of cultural exchange between South and Southeast Asia that spanned a period of two millennia.

It was during this period of cross-cultural contact that Southeast Asia came into its own as a region that was somewhat similar to, yet distinct from, the larger cultural centres of both India and China. K. N. Chaudhuri was right when he wrote that the pre-Modern world of Asia was in many respects well ahead of the market-driven, capital-defined Mo-

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east Asia: recent histories and future directions, Ithaca, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012, p. 9.

2. *Ibid*.

dernity that we see and know today: up to the 17th century, Southeast Asians were moving, migrating, settling, working and trading across the region with ease, living as they did in a borderless fluid world that had not yet seen the regime of the passport and national identity card.[3] Migration, settlement and intermarriage were common then, giving birth to the hybrid cultures of Southeast Asia that we see until today.[4] During that period, to speak of distinct races and ethnicities would have made little sense, as the very words themselves were deemed alien to the common belief and knowledge-system that defined Southeast Asian societies at the period.

It should also be noted that the pivotal position of Southeast Asia meant that it would later become the crossroads for international trade and cultural exchange, and after the Hindu-Buddhist era the region later became home to the other great world religions, notably Islam and Christianity. Today, when we glance at Southeast Asia as a whole, we can see that it is indeed home to almost every major religious and philosophical system in the world, from the Hindu-Buddhist (Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam), to Islam (Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia), to Christianity (Philippines, East Timor) and Confucianism (Singapore). Unlike other parts of the world, Southeast Asia has rarely ever been isolated, and could not have chosen to be so even if it wished: its location at the crossroads of glob-

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3. Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company: 1660-1760*, Cambridge University Press, 1978.

4. *Ibid.*

al trade and migration routes meant that it was forever exposed to diversity and difference from day one.

Inclusivity then and now

It deserves to be stated again and again that diversity and difference have never been novel or alien concepts in Southeast Asia; and nor are these ideas new to the region and the people who live there.

History records that all of the polities of Southeast Asia have been diverse in terms of their social composition: Persians were known to reside in Ayudhaya, Southeast-Asian monks were resident in Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka), itinerant medicants and teachers from South Asia were roaming around Java and finding communities to teach and work in.[5] Chinese, Indian and Arab navigators alike commented extensively about how much of Southeast Asia, in the past, encompassed the world as a whole. When the first European traders arrived in the region they found not isolated, backward communities but rather international cosmopolitan entrepots where commerce was being conducted in dozens of different languages, and where the currencies of the world were in circulation.

Southeast-Asian governance took into account the pluralism and cosmopolitanism that were the salient features of the local polities then: the trading kingdom of Malacca was run according to different time-zones, cognisant of patterns of trade and movement that were dependent upon the monsoon

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5. Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450-1680: expansion and crisis*, v. 2, Yale University Press, 1993.

season.[6] In Malacca the various communities were represented by their respective representatives and spokespersons, and prospered under the rule of pragmatic authorities who appreciated the benefits of international commerce and exchange.

Another striking example of Southeast-Asian diversity in praxis was the port-city of Banten, West Java, that was an independent native polity that could match any of the commercial centres of Europe or the Mediterranean at that time: when Theodorus de Bry wrote about Banten in 1601, his work included some of the first pictorial accounts of social life in Banten, and what we see in these images are representations of Indians, Chinese, Arabs, Persians, Eurasians, Burmans, and other Southeast Asians living and working together in a cosmopolitan setting defined by local sensibilities that regarded diversity and difference as normal. Long before Banten was eclipsed by the Western colonial powers, it—and many other regional commercial centres like it— was a place where identity could be negotiated and where individuals were defined not only by their country of origin but also by their culture, language, religion and profession.[7]

What happened to Southeast Asia in the centuries that followed was a fate shared by the rest of Asia and Africa that was colonised by the Western colonial-trading powers, and where independent polities were reduced to dependent colonies. Between the 17th and 19th century, the mod-

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6. Kenneth R. Hall, *A history of early Southeast Asia: maritime trade and societal development, 100-1500*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010.

7. Geoffrey C. Gunn, *First globalization: the Eurasian exchange, 1500-1800*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, p. 138.

ern colony reconfigured local understandings of identity and fluidity to the point where the movement of peoples, cultures, languages and commodity that had been the hallmark of Asia was put to an end, or at least regulated by the modern colonial state.[8]

Looking at Southeast Asia today we note that the borders that divide the countries of the Southeast-Asian region were not drawn up by Southeast Asians themselves, but rather by the experience of the colonial encounter. As the race to colonise Asia intensified, so did the effort to carve it up into neat blocs or chunks that came under the sway of different colonial powers. In each instance, the fluidity and diversity of these respective societies was brought under control and regulated in a systematic manner, rendering diversity into something that was no longer fluid but rather codified and categorised. The net result was the emergence of distinct colonial states that eventually grew apart and lost that sense of common interconnectedness that was once the norm during the pre-Modern era.

The 19th century witnessed the great shift in terms of the world-view and sensibilities of Southeast Asians across the region: aware of the fact that colonial power was real, and their own lives then determined by the logic of colonial rule, millions of Southeast Asians opposed the injustices of

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8. John Sturgus Bastin and Harry Jindrich Benda, *A history of modern Southeast Asia: colonialism, nationalism, and decolonization*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1968.

colonialism by engaging with its modern logic.[9] Faced with a colonising state that had reconfigured all aspects of their lives, they struggled with Modernity in an attempt to undo its workings within their respective nations.

It was from this period that we see the rise of South-east-Asian nationalism, as a response to Western colonial rule.[10] But from the outset the rise of Southeast-Asian nationalism (as was the case in other parts of Asia and Africa) also borrowed heavily from the vocabulary and ideology of colonial-capitalism as well. Hence it is not surprising to note that while Western colonial rule was seen as the obstacle to self-awareness and self-realisation, the nationalist movements of Asia also mimicked the logic of colonial modernity in many respects: in the countries of Southeast Asia, nationalism and anticolonialism went hand-in-hand and were seen as synonymous with each other. But in the process, Southeast Asia witnessed different strands of ethno-nationalism that opposed different modes of colonialism as well: British, Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

From the 1900s, the politics of identity—and in particular communal, ethnic identity—was the defining feature of Southeast-Asian nationalism. While this was useful in the process of mobilising mass support against a common colonial adversary, it also had the result of privileging some communities over others. In the case of colonial Burma, for

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9. Thomas Suarez, *Early mapping of Southeast Asia: the epic story of seafarers, adventurers, and cartographers who first mapped the regions between China and India*, Tuttle Publishing, 1999, p. 37.

10. John Sturgus Bastin and Harry Jindrich Benda, *op. cit.*

instance, Burmese nationalism united Burmans against the British, but in the course of doing so also targeted South-Asian migrants, who were cast as *compradores* to the British colonial enterprise.[11] Subsequently, in the course of the anticolonial struggle Burmese nationalists not only directed their efforts towards ending British rule and driving them out of Burma, but also cast South-Asian communities and non-Buddhist communities as 'outsiders', despite the fact that historically Burmese society has always been plural and diverse, and that South-Asian settlement and migration to Burma was not a new phenomenon.

The same process and logic was at work in the anticolonial movements that sprung up in other parts of the region, and where occasionally some native and migrant communities were likewise categorised as equal enemies and adversaries to the nationalist cause. In the decades that followed, Southeast-Asian nationalism channelled its energies towards winning and eventually securing the postcolonial state, but in the course of doing so the diversity and cosmopolitan character of some of these societies were rendered more homogenous as a result.

Socio-cultural diversity in Southeast Asia today

Southeast Asia today is one of the most vibrant and important centres for commerce and innovation. With a combined population of 600 million people, the region accounts

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11. Melvin Eugene Page and Penny M. Sonnenburg, eds., *Colonialism: an international, social, cultural, and political encyclopedia*, AM, v. 1, ABC-CLIO, 2003, p. 86.

for 9 per cent of the world's population, spread across an archipelago that spans the width of Europe. And Southeast Asia today is firmly located within the fold of late industrial modernity.[12] The success story of Southeast-Asian governance has become the topic of much discussion since the 1980s, and it is undeniable that in many crucial respects the political economies of the region have fared remarkably well, exceeding the expectations of many. In almost all areas of socio-economic life we see the net result of economic development in the region at present: in the field of education, illiteracy is practically a thing of the past, and the advances made by Southeast-Asian women in particular are phenomenal: female students are often the majority in most local universities, and the gender balance at the work place across the region has changed almost totally. In terms of the provision of the fundamental necessities and obligations of the state, the whole of Southeast Asia today is connected by a regional communicative infrastructure, and there are no remote areas left in the region. In terms of basic healthcare, education, communications and public security, all of the states of Southeast Asia have been able to deliver the necessary to their respective populations.

The development of the postcolonial nation-state in Southeast Asia has meant that by now the opportunity structures and paths toward upward social mobility and individual self-realisation are there, offering Southeast-Asian

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12. Jonathan Rigg, *Southeast Asia: the human landscape of modernization and development*, Routledge, 2004.

citizens more opportunities for education, employment and economic entrepreneurship than ever before. Ideally, this ought to create distinct prospects where communities and individuals feel that their identities are secure and unchallenged, and where identity-politics is seen as just a ladder to be scaled, before the realisation of communal and individual aspirations.

However, when we look closely at Southeast Asia right now, we see that nationalism is on the rise and many Southeast-Asian countries are facing the challenge of contestation and even confrontation in the public domain over issues that relate to identity politics and demands for recognition. We need to seriously ask ourselves why this is the case, and why the citizens of the region have not made the step towards inclusive national politics predicated on the concept of equal universal citizenship.

That Southeast-Asian societies may not move from the simplistic politics of identity where national wealth and political participation are not shared but rather divided along communal-ethnic, cultural-linguistic and religious lines, is a worrying thought.[13] It is not a problem that is unique to the region, for we have seen evidence of the same in other parts of Asia and beyond as well. But it does merit serious consideration, and steps must be taken to understand why this is happening, now, and how this can be overcome.

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13. Aurel Croissant and Christoph Trinn, "Culture, identity and conflict in Asia and Southeast Asia", *Asien*, n. 110, 2009, p. 13-43.

Over the past decade the region has been witness to different forms of sectarian-communitarian conflict, ranging from ethnic-based race-hate campaigns to instances of religious violence. How this could happen now begs for some analysis, for, as noted earlier, Southeast Asia has always been a plural, diverse and cosmopolitan part of the world where different ethnic and religious communities have lived productively and peacefully side-by-side for centuries. Yet today there are disturbing signs of increasing close-mindedness among some Southeast-Asian citizens and communities, as well as demands for a hardening of cultural-social borders. Our region cannot afford to return to the early 2000s where Southeast Asia grabbed the world's headlines for the wrong reasons, notably due to terrorist attacks and ethnic-religious conflict between citizens of the same country.

One of the possible triggers for this development is the manner in which ethnic-race, cultural and religious groups tend to view the world in terms of a logic of 'us against them', where other communities are invariably painted in the light of predators, interlopers and threats to their own identity. Coupled with rising living standards and increased socio-economic expectations, among some of these groups there is the fear that the economic pie may shrink as a result of globalisation, foreign-capital penetration and competition between communities.

This is, however, a wrong diagnosis of how globalisation works—for it is a fact that increased contact with the external world and other communities bring about new op-

portunity structures for innovation, collaboration and enterprise, as our ancestors understood centuries ago. In the past, Southeast-Asian polities prospered as a result of contact with other societies, cultures and economies, and the economic wellbeing of all these polities depended upon the possibility of peaceful and productive interaction with the outside world and other trading nations. That remains true today, but needs to be emphasised time and again—for Southeast Asia cannot afford to go down the path of nationalist exclusivism or isolationism, as the opportunity cost would be too high.

The second thing that needs to be stated strongly now is the fact that pluralism, diversity and difference are not new to our part of the world. Coming at a time when some of the more exclusive-minded religious and communal movements in the region are rejecting the realities of a multicultural world and denouncing diversity as some 'alien, Western' concept, it has to be declared—in the loudest and clearest terms—that Southeast Asia is not, and has never been, a stranger to cosmopolitanism and diversity. From the earliest recorded histories of Southeast Asia, we know for a fact that our communities have developed and evolved to become what they are as a result of encounters with diverse communities, cultures and belief-systems from outside the region. Indeed, all of the major faiths that exist in Southeast Asia today: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism—come from beyond the shores of Southeast Asia.

Diversity is as natural, organic and local to Southeast Asia as are rice fields and coconut trees, and is in fact wired in as part of the collective identity make-up of all our

societies. Restating this obvious fact may seem tiresome to some, but in the face of growing conservative communitarian developments, it has become a necessity.

Thirdly, this reassertion of our diverse past and present is the key to preparing our region and our respective nations for the challenges that lie ahead in the global age we live in. History has recorded that Southeast Asia and its nations have never posed an existential threat to any other part of the world. No premodern Southeast-Asian kingdom or polity has ever invaded India, China or any part of the planet; and yet all the polities of Southeast Asia have benefitted from contact with other parts of the world, and have grown richer—materially, economically, culturally—as a result.

In the global age that we live in today, where the world is better connected than ever before and where human and commodity movement is on a scale that is perhaps unprecedented, Southeast-Asian nations and communities need to be ready to face the reality of a competitive, and often unforgiving, world and global market.

We in Southeast Asia need to re-embrace and re-state our comfort and familiarity with diversity and difference in order to mentally brace ourselves for the expectations and conditions of living in a world where Southeast-Asian nations and communities need to compete on the go, relaxed and assured in our sense of self and with the knowledge that we can succeed in a complex world because complexity itself is not something new or threatening to us all. We need not travel across the globe to learn lessons about

pluralism or diversity, for we have it right in the middle of our own world, standing before us. But being cognisant and appreciative of the past must also come together with the commitment to reject all forms of exclusivism and xenophobia, and being able to internalise the lessons of the past in a manner that allows us to operationalise and instrumentalise them in the present as well as in the future.

Diversity: the role of governance

I spoke earlier of the success of Southeast-Asian governance, in the pre- and postcolonial era. That this is largely true means that there is no need for me to repeat the record of the region's success yet again. But while the nation-states of Southeast Asia have been successful in the domain of economic management and political governance, and adroit at handling the range of challenges and crises that have hit our shores in the past, there remains the issue of socio-cultural-religious diversity to be addressed, and there is the question of how we can manage to govern these differences successfully in the future.

Globalisation today is accelerating at such a pace that the world is not likely to slow down to allow any country or any region to catch up. Southeast Asia's success has been partly due to the fact that its states saw these changes coming: anticipating the end of the Cold War, the peace dividend that followed, the internet age and the age of borderless commerce. But our societies still need to be buffered to some extent against the shocks to their system, and the role of the state here is to lay down the groundwork and prem-

ises upon which a new kind of dynamic globalised politics and economics can take root in our part of the world.

The governments of Southeast Asia have been pragmatic and realistic all along, and focused on consensus-building and peace-management. We have seen to it that the ASEAN region has been free of war between states since 1967, an achievement that cannot be taken for granted when we look at the troubled state of the world today, and also something that some Southeast Asians have come to regard as a norm rather than an exception to be thankful for.

Yet in the years and decades to come, we will live in a world that will be even more complex. Our societies will experience major processes of change to their lifestyles, living conditions, economic health and social relations. As these external variables impact upon us in Southeast Asia, the states of the region need to remember that one of the challenges of governance is to prepare societies for change, and to ready them for the task of living in a complex world where pluralism and diversity will be the norm.

The right government and the right political leadership have a major role to play in this context. Government and political leaders have been successful facilitators to capital and managers of development thus far and the FDIs, etc are coming into the region. But governments and leaders control the key instruments of state power and social management, such as education, foreign policy and interstate diplomacy. Here is where the present-day state in Southeast Asia has a role to play, to shape and determine the likely shape of Southeast Asia in the future. For a start, more ef-

fort has to be made in the educational sector to remind the younger generation of Southeast Asians not only of the recent successes of postcolonial Southeast Asia, but also of the long history of intercommunal contact and exchange that were once the defining features of Southeast Asia's diverse and complex society. From an early age, Southeast-Asian citizens need to know and learn that diversity and pluralism are not new and certainly not a threat to their own rich and complex identities. Political leaders must commit to the broader perspective of accepting the historical legacy of the region.

The advocacy by Malaysia of a Global Moderate Movement can be interpreted as having understood the historical commitment of SEA and that democracy must operate side by side with pluralism. In essence, this proposal must be internalised into the governance and body politic of SEA in order that nationalism and the pursuit of state interests are balanced in the interests of all in the region and that the increasingly complex challenges of extremism as well addressed by countervailing forces of moderation.

States also have a role to play in creating the right sociocultural and—crucially—socio-legal environment whereby diversity can be recognised and protected, and where communities can freely express themselves, interact and achieve both personal and collective success and self-realisation in the public domain without fear of being labelled as alien, foreign or unwanted. Living as we do in a region where movement, fluidity, migration and settlement has been the norm for two thousand years, a sense of common homeliness and

belonging among all Southeast Asians is something that all the governments and states of the ASEAN region ought to be working for, in order to ensure that the socio-cultural, intellectual and economic borders of Southeast Asia remain open and inclusive—of ourselves, each other, and other communities from outside Southeast Asia as well. Diversity and inclusivity are not factors or prerogatives that can be governed or dictated by states, but if the history of Southeast Asia has anything to teach us today, it is the lesson that governance can be conducted in a manner that recognises and reflects diversity, and which accommodates the need and necessity of accommodation itself. This has been the Southeast-Asian way, since even before the region came up with the concept of ASEAN. A reaffirmation of such a form of politics that 319 recognises, protects and normalises diversity and difference would not mark a departure from our historical path, but merely confirm that we have stayed true to the ASEAN way.

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