NATIONAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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Introduction

Emergence of 'nation-state' as the dominant societal type is one of the most striking and significant historical developments of our time. It is significant in the sense that until about the end of the 19th century it was very much a European phenomenon but in the post-World War I period it has become a model of political and social development for the new states emerging from the former colonial empires of the European nations. This emulation has in return resulted in considerable economic, social, political and cultural upheavals in the new states which, notwithstanding their impressive programmes of national integration and development, often designed with the expert assistance from the American and European academic establishments, have done little to resolve the underlying causes of these problems. This paper is an attempt to understand the problem of national development and ethnic loyalties in the new states. We begin with a brief examination of the notion of nation-state.

Nation and State

The concept of nation state from the perspective of European history refers to a politically organized society which has historically enjoyed a legitimate claim of independent existence. It also implies a coincidence, in a broad sense, of common culture and territory of residence. This would mean that for a typical individual living in such a society his/her 'national identity' will be coterminous with his 'ethnic' or 'cultural' identity which he/she would acquire by virtue of his/her birth in the society. Perhaps this is the reason why most of us tend to use the terms Nation and State interchangeably and thus fail to recognize the important differences between meanings of these terms. The term 'nation', in most European languages, refers specifically to the ethnic group - a community of people which share a common culture and real or alleged distinctions of common origin. The term 'state', on the other hand, refers to the formal political organization which grants citizenship.

The close links between nation and state arose because in the course of the 19th century European history, with the rise of nationalism, every European Nation demanded its own state. Such claims were based on the principle of 'national self-determination' which came to be recognized as the legitimate political right of social groups sharing a common cultural tradition. This led to the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottomon Empires into their ethnic components, each organized as a state. In the Western Hemisphere the United States is perhaps unique in the sense that it uses the term nation (American Nation) referring to all those who chose to become its citizens rather than to an ethnic group. It is, in fact as Peter Rose points out in his recent book, a nation of nations, or as another sociologist has put it, the first new nation. The distinction between nation and state was obscured between the world wars

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when so many independent states of the world were organized on the basis of single dominant ethnic groups, although several of them had large colonial empires in which the native people were considered as inferior and subordinate groups (Glazer, 1975).

The close links between the state and nation were broken in the post-World War II period. The decline and eventual disintegration of the former European colonial empires in Asia, Africa and South America, in the period immediately after World War II, resulted in the formation of new states which were not nation-state. The territorial boundaries of these new states, often laid down arbitrarily by their colonial rulers for administrative and strategic conveniences, were readily accepted, or came to be accepted, by their new rulers as the 'natural' state boundaries. More often than not the new states were multi-ethnic states in which various ethnic groups or at least their social elites had joined hands in their bid to gain political independence from their colonial rulers. After having succeeded in this objective, the claims of the contending ethnic elites to the political power and other forms of rewards in the new political entity surfaced with full vigour. However, most of the new states either lacked the resources to meet these claims or such claims were not perceived as legitimate by the new ruling elites. There, thus, emerged the problem of 'national integration' and 'nation-building' , i.e. , moulding people of different ethnic groups into a single community which, when the chips are down, effectively commands men's loyalty, over-riding the claims both of the lesser communities within it and those which cut across it (Emerson,1960).

The problem of creating a single nation, of course, varies in intensity from one country to another, but it is a problem common to most, if not all, new states and is as visible in South-East Asian states as elsewhere.

The Process of Nation Building

The policies regarding nation-building and national integration are predicated on a certain image of the new political entity. The image is, as stated earlier, that of a nation-state in which there will be only one over-arching national identity which somehow would eclipse all other attachments, including the ethnic ones. The leaders of the new states encouraged their people to think of themselves as citizens of the state rather than as members of particular ethnic, regional or linguistic groups. Some have gone so far as to formulate policies aimed at discouraging people from identifying with their ethnic or regional groups. This was clearly the intention of the Government of Pakistan, to cite only one of the many such examples, when in 1955 it merged the four linguistically and culturally distinct provinces in order to creat the 'one-unit' called West Pakistan, or what is now Pakistan. The intention was to dissuade people from thinking of themselves as Punjabis, Pathans, Baluchis, and Sindhis. Often such policies are justified as necessary to promote the processes of national integration and wider national loyalty. In short, consciously or unconsciously the leaders of the new states subscribe to the classical European image of the nation-state.

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The problem of nation-building and national identity has attracted a great deal of academic interest. The social scientists have placed it under their academic telescope to analyse its nature and identify its various variants (see Eisenstadt and Rokkan, 1975). I shall not burden with the whole compendium of their findings or intellectual excursions. But for the purposes of this paper I should like to refer here to a very provocative paper by Chan Heng Chee and Hans-Dieter Evers (1975). In the paper entitled 'Nation Building and National Identity in Southeast Asia' , the authors identify two dominant approaches followed by various South-East Asian States in their efforts to forge national identity and build the nation. They have labelled these approaches as 'Regressive" and ' Progressive' [1].

The 'Regressive' approach aims at building national identity by looking back into the glorious and golden past as an effort to link the present with the pre-colonial past and at forgetting the colonial experience as a sort of bad dream. It often leads to fictionalizing and manipulating history.

The ' Progressive' approach, they argue, is aimed at shedding away the heritage of the feudal or colonial past which is detrimental to progress and seek their identity in liberal and socialist doctrines. They seek to construct a new national identity based on rationality and socialism and not on the remanent of the inglorious past.

The authors suggest that these two variants of nation-building and creating national identity can be found in the same country championed by different elites contending for political leadership. The observations of the authors are applicable to the extent one uses them to analyze the national image of the state. They do not attempt to analyze the problem of individual's attachment to the national system. To this problem we shall return a little later.

In the light of these observations (on the approaches to nation-building and national identity in South-East Asian countries) let us examine briefly some of their likely consequences. Given the multi-ethnic compositions of the South-West Asian States, the regressive approach will tend to glorify the past of the dominant ethnic group(s) and thus create conditions which may increase the cultural and social distances between the various ethnic groups - a condition of 'social dissonance' in which the less dominant ethnic groups would have to adjust their own 'glorious past' . And in the case of the progressive approach, the past is one of those nightmares that one would rather forget in favour of more rational and socialistic self-image. The vision may well be the vision of a very small minority, but it is likely to be heightening and sharpening of the ethnic difference within the State. We are in fact witnessing an increasing resurgence of ethnic and quasi ethnic identities in the new states. A situation which has led, in some instances, to bloody and violent confrontations between different ethnic groups.

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## Basis of Group Identity and Nation Building

How does one explain this phenomenon? The 'nation-building' policies to which I have referred earlier do not in fact provide a very satisfactory answer. For this we need to examine the sociological and social psychological roots of the group identity and mechanism of involvement in the national community. I shall do this by referring to a recent exposition of this problem by Kelman in a UNESCO-sponsored seminar on the national and ethnic loyalties (Tajfel, 1970).

According to Kelman there are two dimensions of personal involvement in social systems including the national system. He calls these dimensions 'sentimental' and 'instrumental'. "An individual is sentimentally attached when he sees the system as representing him as being in some central way a reflection and extension of himself. For the sentimentally attached the system is legitimate and deserving of his loyalty because it is the embodiment of a group in which his personal identity is anchored." In contrast to this "an individual is instrumentally attached when he sees the system as an effective vehicle for achieving his own ends and the ends of other system members. For the instrumentally attached, the system is legitimate and deserving of his loyalty because it provides the organisation for a smoothly running society in which individuals can participate to their mutual benefit and have some assurance that their needs and interests will be met." (Quoted in Tajfel, 1970).

The core of Kelman's distinction between sentimental and instrumental attachment to a national community (as well as to other social systems) is in the opposition between attachment to a national entity based on its relevance to an individual's "personal identity" and attachment based on the satisfaction of an individual's "needs and interests".

Whether a person's attachment to the nation-state is largely sentimental or largely instrumental, or some balanced combination of the two, depends on his personal and social characteristics - such as his place in society, his education, his residence, his religion and ethnic identifications, his personal history, his personality dispositions. One can also examine, however, characteristics of the system that make one or the other of these two types of attachment more probable in a given society and at a given point of time.

From this perspective one can argue (in fact as Kelman himself argues) that a modern nation-state's legitimacy depends on the extent to which the population perceives the state and regime as (a) reflecting its ethnic and cultural identity, ans (b) meeting its needs and interests.

But several recent developments have tended to undermine both aforementioned bases of legitimacy in most of the new states. Some of the problems of the legitimacy have directly arisen from

(a) the fact that in a great many new states the political regimes are made up of groups which are economically, socially and culturally vastly different from the great majority of the masses they govern;

(b) the failure of the ruling elites and the national governments to meet the legitimate needs and interests of their citizens, and

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    (c) the public policies which are perceived by some of the constituent ethnic
or quasi ethnic groups as discriminatory.

Furthermore, most of the new states have not undergone very significant struc-
tural change since independence which has resulted in the consolidation of the
old regimes which often represent one ethnic group or a small segment of popu-
lation, thus continuing a pattern of government which excludes a wider participa-
tion in the national institutions. (The absence of significant structural change may
also be a deliberate policy of the ruling elite in order to continue their political
power).

The other problems of legitimacy have emerged from the less suspecting sources.
These include internal migration of people (state sponsored or otherwise) from
one region to another inhabited by members of a different ethnic group. In many
cases the multi-ethnic populations of the new states have been historically and
traditionally occupying different areas. This ecological segregation of the various
ethnic groups was reinforced historically by force of tradition as well as by the
authority of the traditional elites to exercise power if necessary to protect their
territory from large-scale migration of the 'outsiders'. Often such rights were
protected by the legal and political framework laid down by their former colonial
rulers. But within the political and legal framework of the new state these tradi-
tional mechanisms aimed at protecting the territorial rights of the members of
ethnic groups occupying distinct geographical areas become 'out-dated'.

The political and legal framework of the new states invests its citizens with the
right of internal movements. Frequently this has led to mass movements of
people from more populated areas to less populated areas. Sometimes such
movements are sponsored by the state as part of its developmental policies.
Whatever the reasons, the internal migration of 'outsiders' into territory hi-
storically occupied by members of another ethnic group often results in intensi-
fying competition for the scarce resources and frequently leads to ethnic conflicts
of various intensities and magnitudes. One sees evidence of such ethnic conflicts
in the Philippines, Malaysia and in Indonesia[2].

These conflicts are further aided by the doctrines of egalitarianism and self-de-
termination, the two key ideological weapons which in the first instance facili-
tated, deconolization and led to the emergence of many of the new states. The in-
ternational communication and mass media through which people can learn how to
fight for their rights and interests from the outside groups tend to further accen-
tuate the problem.

Then there is the other source creating the conditions conducive to the intensifi-
cation of ethnicity and it is rooted in the very process of modernization and
development which the governments of the new states have initiated. The problem
can be stated as follows: there is a loss of traditional and primordial identities
because of the trends of modernization. This means urbanization, new occupa-
tions mass education transmitting general and abstract information, mass me-
dia presenting a general (and universal) culture. All this should make original
ethnic identities - tribal, linguistic, religious, regional - weaker. However, in
mass society there is need for the individual for some kind of identity - smaller
than the state, larger than the family, something akin to a "familistic allegian-

ce". Accordingly, on the basis of the remaining fragments of the primordial iden-
tities, new ethnic identities are constructed (Glazer, 1975). And as another ob-
server has put it: the erosion of the intimate structures of traditional society, an
erosion inherent in the size, mobility, general ecology and organization of (in-
dustrial and) industrializing societies. If a man is not firmly set in a social niche,
whose relationships as it were endow him with his identity, he is obliged to carry
his identity with him, in his whole style of conduct and expression: in other words,
his 'culture' becomes his identity. The process of so-called modernization which
in the cognition of modern man invariably means a deliberate 'replacement' of
old structures, creates conditions in which 'culture' - the necessary ingredient
of ethnicity and ethnic consciousness - becomes increasingly important. Thus con-
ditions giving rise to ethnicity in our particular social context inheres in the very
nature of things (Gellner, 1964). Even where cultural differences, as a result of
exposure to the same statewide educational system, mass media and mass socie-
ty, tend to become less pronounced (as indeed is the case in most industrialized
societies of Europe and North America) it does not lead to lessening of the ethnic
consciousness because people still very much continue to use ethnic labels.

These, then, are some of the reasons for the intensification of ethnic identity
in the new states in which ethnicity was supposed to have disappeared in favour
of a wider and all-encompassing national identity. This problem also has some
significant theoretical implications for the nature and pattern of social conflict
in these states. This is to be examined more thoroughly below.

## Class Conflict or Ethnic Conflict

In recent years an increasing number of social scientists (working in developing
countries in general, and in South East Asian countries in particular) have ar-
gued that the emerging ecological, socio-political and economic situations in
different South East Asian countries are more conducive to the class based con-
flicts rather than the ethnic based conflicts as the primary mechanism through
which the contending claims to the state's resources will be resolved. To support
-this assertion they point to the changing ecological structure of the South East
Asian urban areas which increasingly show segregation based on economic status
rather than ethnic affiliation. It has also been suggested that the process of
economic growth has led to the development of a rigid class structure. But they
see this rigidity primarily in the case of upper classes who have been the major
beneficiary of the rewards of economic growth and consequently have succeeded
in consolidating their position. The upper classes are seen as ethnically hetero-
geneous.

Furthermore, they argue that the post-independence period is charakterized by
intense conflict between groups and factions. Many of these groups shared ruling
class features: they had access to power and wealth and they dominated largescale
organizations like political parties, bureaucracies, armies or business companiers.
But they were fragmented by ethnic, cultural or religious identities. After classes
are consolidated by alliance between groups to protect their common interest and domi-

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nant power positions in the society, the direction of conflict tends to shift: con - flict between ethnic, religious and cultural groups declines and conflict between the new upper class and the peasant or urban masses tends to arise. They conclu - de that: instead of the ousting of rival factions we will have insurgency instead of coup d'etat revolutions (Evers, 1973, 1974).

I do not entirely share these views. I would argue that class, for a variety of rea - sons (which I would not be able to elaborate within the scope of this paper fully), has not (at least as yet) become a very effective vehicle of mobilization for social action to protect and to secure the legitimate group interests.

Briefly, the reason for this may be as follows: the modern state has bevome the chief arbiter of economic well-being, political status, etc. In such a situation it is not usually effective enough to assert claims on behalf of large but loosely aggregated groups such as 'workers' , 'peasants' , 'working classes' . Claims of this order are too general to elicit a satisfactory response and even when they do the benefits are necessarily diffuse and often evanescent. As a matter of stra - tegic efficacy, it becomes necessary to disaggregate in order to make claims for a group small enough to make signifikant concessions possible and small enough to pro - duce some gain from the concession made. The reason for the emergence of eth - nicity as a potent force, therefore, would appear to be in the strategic efficacy of ethnicity in making legitimate claims on the resources of modern state.

So far, I have argued that the governments of the new states have embarked upon policies of nation-building which tend to over-emphasize efficacy of national iden - tity and regard any other form of group identity as a rival and an impediment to the development of national identity. I have suggested that in spite of all their efforts the ethnic identities in the new states have not disappeared, in fact they have intensified.

Some of the reasons for this flow from the very narrow vision of the governments of the new states and their so-called nation-building policies, which often rele - gate the facts of the situation to ' traditionalism' (projortively) which must be cast away in order to build a rational society. But the cultural and social factors do not disappear by public decrees. They often assume new significance. The other factors have to do with the very nature of the modern state as an arbiter of economic well-being and legitimate interests of its various constituent social groups and with the very process of modernization which erodes structures and enhances the importance of culture. Finally, I have argued that ethnicity seems to become a far more efficient and strategic means of mobilizing people to pro - tect group interests than the social class[3]. At least, so it appears to me.

Does this mean that new states have failed in their efforts of nation-building and in inculcating new national identities ? I would say No. They have not necessarily failed in their nation-building efforts but certainly they have slowed down the realization of the goals of these policies by not recognizing the dynamics of ethni - city and their legitimate place in the new social structure. Many of the new sta - tes, notwithstanding ethnic diversity of their population, have existed in some form of functioning social units for much longer a period than a great many Euro - pean States, and there is no reason to doubt the ability of the very same people to continue to do so in their new political groupings by being loyal to both the

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state as well as to the social groups they belong to.

As Clifford Geertz puts it: "Multi-ethnic, usually multi-linguistic and sometimes multi-racial, the populations of the new states tend to regard the immediate, concrete, and to them inherently meaningful sorting implicit in such 'natural' diversity, as the substantial content of their individuality. To subordinate these specific and familiar identifications in favour of a generalized commitment to an overarching and somewhat alian civil order is to risk a loss of definition as an autonomous person, either through absorption into a culturally undifferentiated mass, or what is even worse, through domination by some other rival ethnic, racial or linguistic community that is able to imbua that order with the temper of its own personality" (Geertz, 1963, 108-109).

The emergent conclusion is that the leaders of the new states must not try to wish primordial attachments and ethnic identities out of existence, by belittling them or denying their reality, rather they should recognize and domesticate them. They must reconcile them with the unfolding civil order by divesting them of their legitimising force with respect to governmental authority, by neutralising the apparatus of the state in relationship to them, and by channelling discontent arising out of their dislocation into properly political rather than para-political forms of expression.

Footnotes

1) The authors also identify a third variant of nation-building which they label as 'pragmatism' and which they argue is the approach followed by the Government of Singapore to create a Singaporean National Identity (Chan and Evers, 1973, 304).

2) This problem is particularly pronounced at present in the Mindanao region of the Philippines where a five year old violent confrontation between the members and sympathisers of the Mindanao National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippine Government has claimed thousands of lives. The problem was described by a MNLF sympathiser in the following words "... the Philippine Government should have opened its eyes to see the truth that MNLF is after genuine reconstruction - the complete rehabilitation of Mindanao, the Muslims ancestral historic living space, which 30 years ago predominantly belonged to them until they were driven by the northern carpetbaggers and settlers to live in discomfort and unrest in the small portion of land they now occupy. By launching a violent revolution, which can also be aptly termed a reforming stride to more meaningful change, the MNLF seeks racial recognition and self-identification of the Muslim race in the Philippines. With painstaking sacrifices it has nearly accomplished this difficult feat, but what remains as an obstacle is the staunch refusal of the Philippine Government to see this." (Omar, 1977). For a detailed discussion and analysis of the conflict see Utrecht (1975).

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3) An extreme example of this (i. e. , the strategic efficacy of ethnicity in mak-
ing claims on the resources of modern state) is to be found in the political
system of Malaysia which is based primarily on the alliance of three major
communal parties (United Malays National Organization (UNMO), Malayan
Chinese Association (MCA), and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). This 'Alli-
ance Party' (as it is called in Malaysia) has ruled the country since indepen-
dence. Primarily it is an alliance of the Malay, Chinese and Indian elites
who maintain their privileged positions by functioning within the existing po-
litical system. It would be, of course, naive to assume that this alliance
of the communal parties has functioned to the satisfaction of all members of
the Chinese, Malay or Indian communities. In fact it has not. But by provi-
ding access to political power through communally organized and based poli-
tical parties, the political system has succeeded in reducing the ethnic ten-
sions by accommodating from time to time the claims of the members of
various ethnic groups. For a discussion of this problem see Ratnam (1965).

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