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Interest, nations, and the state in development: Instability in archipelagic Southeast Asia

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The Southeast Asian archipelago has become marked by divisions within existing states, placing significant local constraints upon the process of 'development'. These divisions include 'vertical' challenges to the state, i.e. they have the capacity to split the state into geographic divisions based on proto-nationalist identity, and 'horizontal' challenges to the state, defined by ethnic and communal rivalry and conflict. This brief paper will canvas some issues in such divisions.

In Indonesia, vertical challenges exist in Aceh and West Papua, and arguably Maluku, (Moluccas) while horizontal challenges exist between Dayak and Madurese transmigrants in West and Central Kalimantan, and between religious groups (Christians and Muslims) in Maluku and in Central Sulawesi. Beyond this, there has also been racial violence against ethnic Chinese, notably in 1998, and between other religious, regional and political groups. All of this is set against a backdrop of continuing economic chaos, a weak state and an often brutal, coercive and politically engaged armed forces (Kingsbury 2003b). Malaysia's racial violence has been relatively quiet since the late 1960s, although there have been recent clashes between ethnic Malays and ethnic Chinese. Resentment towards peninsula Malays by the inhabitants of northern Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah) have also been noted, in particular by the indigenous 'Dayak' groups towards exploitation of natural resources. Further to the east, the Philippines continues to be wracked by a corrupt and self-serving elite, a weak state, a geographically resurgent New People's Army (see Collier 2002) and, posing a vertical challenge, an active Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Moro National Liberation Front, and Abu Sayyef, all operating under an Islamic umbrella.

**Interest**

Within state formation, the idea of the state, interest is the defining characteristic of political identity. Interest can be manifested as 'self-interest' (of oneself and one's immediate family or group); 'shared interest' (concurrent with the wider group); 'enlightened self-interest' (of oneself through helping secure the fortunes of others); and 'altruism' (primarily to benefit others). Of these types of interest, self-interest and shared interest tend to dominate most societies, although aspects of the latter two types of interest are often held up as the public ideal. Shared or aggregate interest is the basis of joint claims and as such is the foundation of political groupings and equally has the capacity to define political groups not just in their own terms but in opposition to each other (competing interest).

These types of interest fall into further sets of categories within the context of the Southeast Asian archipelago. Modernist political conceptions locate aggregate interest as most common in industrially developed, literate and contiguous political communities, identifying interest across communities similarly located within an economic framework (e.g. factory workers, 'middle class', etc.) but who are unlikely to personally know each other (see Anderson 1991). Such communities that express their aggregate interest as policy preference, are the basis of modern political parties. They are identified with more 'advanced' or modernist conceptions of political development and are usually regarded as necessary for the functioning of a modernist national polity (Kingsbury 2003a).

In Indonesia, aggregate interest is limited as a consequence of the relatively recent trend towards industrialisation and because of the logistical difficulties in establishing communication and common interest across the archipelago. It is also limited because of the success of the New Order in severely restricting the development of aggregate interest groups and genuine political parties (re Parati Komunis Indonesia or PKI, the Indonesian Communist Party, see McVey 1997:96-117, 1990:5-27), and its reification of local identity.

In times of such tension communally based political societies tend to retreat to ethnic or community group loyalty despite what might otherwise be an underlying material commonality of interest between groups, or division of interest within a particular group. Distinctions between communal groups tend to be made on grounds of social or cultural identification and indeed their primary focus may well not be political, hence they are sometimes are not well equipped to address complex policy issues. This is because the inherent tension between aggregate communal interest and sub-aggregate interest does not allow the development of coherent or internally consistent policy positions. Political parties often retain aspects of communalism, but in theory at least they aim to address issues that extend beyond the immediate tribal or communal group and may distinguish fundamental differences of interest within such a group.

Malaysia has most successfully combined communal and modernist political considerations, in part by adopting economically discriminatory 'repressive-responsive' policies (Crouch 1996). In the Philippines the tensions are between the self-interested elite and appeals to populism within a nominally democratic framework. This under-developed aggregation produces a lack of internal coherence in policy making, which has
been reflected in the Philippines political history. Indonesian politics is characterised by political parties based on communal interest (notably the Islamic parties) or loyalty based on cascading systems of patronage (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia - Perjuangan, Golkar). Within such elite-driven systems, the (usually) charismatic party leaders derive loyalty primarily to themselves as individuals and not to the party institution.

Vertical or proto-nationalist interest tends to have pre-colonial foundations (e.g. Acehnese sultanate, Sulu sultanate), some of which were enhanced or exacerbated by colonial and post-colonial processes. These could be said to include the encouragement of regional identity for the purposes of divide and rule, the use of soldiers from one area against the peoples of another, and through the relocation of ‘loyalists’ to areas where loyalty is suspect (e.g. East Timor, Maluku, Aceh, West Papua, Mindanao, Sarawak), often under the guise of relieving population pressure in loyalist heartlands.

Regional state formation
States and nationalist groups define their appeal to solidarity in modernist terms, appeals to ‘post-modernism’ being reflected in claims to both global and local challenges to existing states. However, globalism regards the state as the basic unit of international relations and with the capacity to make law, wage war and so on, while localism is expressed either as claims to a new statehood or for greater recognition within existing states. The territory of states may not necessarily be contiguous, although if it is not there usually needs to be some national or historical precedent for the existence of the state. States also do not have to be based on a single national group, although without a core national group, or the identification of a set of nationalist values around which a core can cohere, a state would be subject to significant and possibly destructive internal tensions.

Globally, earlier models of the state were significantly different to the modern state form, notably in the ambiguity of earlier state boundaries and the extent of their authority. The model of the Hindu-Buddhist mandala has been used to describe pre-colonial Southeast Asian states, with the state in this case focussing on the centre and receding in the assertion of its authority towards the periphery (see Kingsbury 2001:14-18). In archipelagic Southeast Asia island states claims to sovereignty were rarely unchallenged and often fanciful. We read some of the claims of the Majapahit and Sri Vijaya empires, but little of the thoughts of their more distant subjects.

Colonialism in the archipelago initially operated similarly to existing states, establishing bases of authority from which they initially asserted a claim to economic advantage. It was only when there was a shift from trade with existing states to controlling those states and then developing economic endeavour (e.g. plantations, mineral extraction) that colonialism began to replicate a European/modernist understanding of state authority, complete with territorial boundaries, assertions of legal sovereignty, and institutional structures.

Legitimacy of the state
The legitimacy of the state rests on whether or not it has the capacity or desire to represent political agreement with its constituent groups. The legitimacy of a state is also derived from its appeal to a right to exist, e.g. Indonesia is the successor state to the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), claiming external recognition of that claim. That is, the state can claim legitimacy as a successor to a pre-existing state or states, and as the (romanticised) embodiment of the aspirations of its citizens. However, where the claim of a successor state does not represent agreement (East Timor, West Papua, Aceh) or where the precursor/successor state was itself understood as illegitimate (e.g. NEI), this claim to legitimacy is difficult to sustain with particular intra-state nationalist groups.

If the legitimacy of the state is in question, the territorial integrity, or ideology, of the state is usually maintained through force. Military force to guarantee territorial integrity has been applied in the southern Philippines, across Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. However, this use of force does not imply stability, but usually the freezing of hostility. In such a context, it is possible for a state to re-legitimise itself, e.g. through economic growth, the proper functioning of the institutions of state, and political participation. However, the experience of the archipelago has commonly been that the freezing of hostility has been used to advantage by more favourably placed individuals and groups at the expense of indigenous inhabitants. Thus regional tensions remain and indeed build.

This situation of continuing unmet political claims is not able to be contained forever in a strong (assertive) state, but faces real problems in a weak (disorganised) state, in which central authority has reduced coherence. Indeed, the necessity for the imposition of state power rather than the voluntary acceptance of state authority implies an inherent weakness in state structure, for which it only requires changed circumstances to reveal.

‘National’ and communal legitimacy
In terms of the legitimacy of the proto-nationalist or communal aspiration, legitimacy is both easier and more difficult to substantiate. In a qualitative sense, the legitimacy of a local claim can be relatively easy to gauge. No one who had spent any time in East Timor prior to its 1999 ballot and had even a passingly frank conversation with its inhabitants could have been left in any doubt as to the outcome of the ballot. While this was hardly a quantitative (‘scientific’) assessment, it proved to be remarkably accurate. Similarly in Aceh, the extent of popular support for the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka – GAM), at least among ethnic Acehnese, is very high. It is a similar situation in West Papua where the ratio of support for independence is perhaps not quite as high as Aceh, but significant and undoubtedly in the majority with ethnic Melanesians (‘Papuans’). More strongly again, however, popular support for a separate ‘national’ identity could be said to be high among the Islamic population of the southern Philippines. But in a positivist sense, without referenda on self-determination, such claims remain formally unproven.
As discussed elsewhere (Kingsbury 2001:ch2), the idea of ‘nation’ is understood here as distinct from the state, the nation being a bonded cultural group that identifies itself through the expression of a common political aspiration or manifestation. Frequent although not limiting characteristics of such a nation include the use of a common language (cultural signification and mutual intelligibility), values, history or shared set of myths, other cultural markers such as a common religion, often a common territory or identified ‘homeland’ and sometimes a common enemy. Cultural markers such as a common religion, often a common mutual intelligibility), values, history or shared set of myths, other cultural markers such as a common religion, often a common territory or identified ‘homeland’ and sometimes a common enemy.

Some scholars have used the term ethnie to describe the ‘pre-national’ community (Smith 1986, 1991), in which the defining characteristic is cultural commonality but not yet defined in terms of territory. This idea of ethnie resonates throughout the Southeast Asian archipelago, being dominated as it is by scores of such ethnie, only some of which have more recently begun to define themselves in terms of ‘nation’. The Philippines, for instance, could be said to comprise of more than 70 such ethnie and arguably it has also come to comprise two nations, although in formal terms, only one state. The Philippines barangay accord to this model of ethnie, as could the greater long-house communities of Borneo/Kalimantan, and a number of smaller communities in eastern Indonesia. ‘Nation’, however, has a territorial identification wider than just the immediately local, implying a more developed set of social and political arrangements.

East Timor illustrates both ethnie and state, and the problems of becoming a nation. Since 1999, without a common enemy and with many internal pressures, East Timor has experienced a partial devolution to local identification, indicating that the process of nation-creation is not (yet) complete. In the Philippines, the multiple ethnie accepting Christianity comprise a nation. The other Filipino ‘nation’ could be said to be the BangsaMoro, which developed its post-barangay nationalism in response to Spanish/American/Christian Filipino incursions.

Combined with the Philippines’ Islamic challenge is that of ‘communism’. As a consequence of lack of ideological clarity, internal purges (see Weekly 1996:35-7) and the collapse of international communism, the New People’s Army (NPA) in the 1990s devolved to comprise a number of groups, notably on the islands of Luzon, Negros, Cebu and Mindanao. The primary characteristic of these groups is their geographic locations and ethnic identity. In this, class conflict was divided vertically by ethnicity and geography. However, the NPA has regrown to double its size to 12,000 (Collier 2002:1), and has rebuilt its conventional aggregate base.

In northern Borneo, no such violent assertion of local identity exists, although in the 1950s until the early 1960s there were divisions that combined both aggregate and ethnic foundations. The predominantly ethnic-Chinese Malayan Communist Party was active in both Sarawak and the Malay Peninsula throughout he 1950s and into the early 1960s, and until the 1970s on the peninsula. The Sarawak branch, the Sarawak People’s Guerrilla Force (SPGF) was distinct from the peninsula branch, having different origins. Similarly in Brunei in 1962, the Tentara Nasional Kalimantan Untara (TNKU - North Borneo National Army), an expression of the Partai Ra’kyat (Peoples’ Party) in favour of democratising the sultanate and uniting Sarawak, Brunei and Sabah.

In the period since the 1960s, and notably since the 1970s, in North Borneo there has been a different type of political distinction based on both ethnic identity and upon economic exploitation and political representation. Ethnic distinctions existed between the five major ethno-linguistic groups on Sarawak and Sabah, and along lines of kinship and class (Harris 1956:37), but more importantly continue between them and the coastal Malays, and Chinese with whom they are somewhat closer. Since the 1980s, a high level of rainforest logging in Sarawak has displaced numerous Dayak communities and engendered a high level of local resentment and, in some cases, physical opposition (Rengah Sarawak 2002, Jalong 2002).

Cohesion and the state

Economic underperformance in both Indonesia and the Philippines has probably been the primary contributing factor in regional instability. In simple terms, the elites of both countries have been corrupt and self-serving, and there has been a marked lack of cohesion around notions such as a social contract. This has created tensions amongst under-classes whose desperation has driven them into identifying a range of culprits for their problems, even though in many cases the alleged culprits are themselves hapless victims.

In this, economic exploitation of particular regions has perhaps demonstrated the greatest capacity for regional instability, accounting for chronic violence in the Philippines, social unrest in northern Borneo and violence throughout Indonesia. In this there is a sense that the high level of artificiality in archipelac state creation has created opportunities for metropolitan elites to exploit the resources traditionally belonging to the inhabitants of the region from which they are derived. It could be argued that there are no states that in some senses are not artificial (see Aspinall 2002), and indeed as all political communities beyond the local require some degree of imaginative understanding they are all ‘constructed’ to some degree. However, the combination of peoples who do not share contiguity of territory, an original common language, a common culture, or common histories and myths does detract from the capacity for a ‘natural’ self-selection of political communities.

Conversely, colonial empires were constructed and maintained through violence, or the threat of violence, were necessarily coercive and did not, according to the claims of independence, enjoy local legitimacy. The successor states to such colonial empires inherited the same coercively defined boundaries and faced, as a first challenge, the issue of their own legitimacy. Liberation may have been an initial legitimising factor, but subsequent internal ‘colonialism’ acted to delegitimise many of the gains of liberation.

Assuming no other change, such consequent dissent requires coercion to ensure the continuing viability of the state. This then creates a cycle of repression and further dissent, the only outcome
of which can be instability and, inevitably, weakness. This weakness plays upon and exacerbates already significant institutional weakness of a coercive state. A state that holds itself together through repression may have little internal movement, at least if the repression is successful, as it has been from time to time in Indonesia and the Philippines, but it will not be stable and it will remain riven by internal flaws and weaknesses.

The questions remain, then, to what extent is the archipelago governable in a conventional, modernist sense, and how the geography and ethnicity of the region challenges notions of cohesion and security. It was probably possible to develop ‘national’ identities from etnie based on colonial constructions if there had been a genuine commitment to sharing the benefits of the state under regularised institutional arrangements. However, the failure to do this and the repression used to control subsequent dissent has meant, in some cases, that what were once dissident voices that could be satisfied are now beyond the point of being brought back into the ‘national’ fold. This could be said to be the case in Aceh, West Papua and in and around Mindanao. This does not mean these areas will necessarily be able to break away from the state. But it does imply that there will be a high level of dissent in these areas, that they will remain unstable and insecure, and that will continue to act as an impediment to what is broadly conceived of as ‘development’.

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