



THE MAKING OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS

**STATE, ETHNICITY, INDIGENISM
AND CITIZENSHIP**

Leo Suryadinata

Foreword by Wang Gungwu

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Foreword

Professor Leo Suryadinata belongs to the generation of Indonesian-born Chinese to grow up with a non-Chinese nationalist revolution. He started his education in Chinese schools at a time when the idea of nation in China was coupled with an internationalist Communist movement. Around him, however, were powerful imaginings of an Indonesian nation and, in the neighbourhood, other decolonizing states at varying stages of nation-building. When I met him over forty years ago, he had completed a Master's thesis at Monash University, his first study of the overseas Chinese in Java under Dutch rule. Already he was probing the historical roots of how certain groups of Chinese had responded before World War II to Dutch, Chinese and emerging Indonesian ideas of what nations should be like. And, to my knowledge, the nation question has never been far from his mind ever since.

Being fluent in the Indonesian and Chinese language from young, he also mastered English, and went on to study in universities that taught in Chinese, Indonesian and English. Thus his multiple perspectives on the linguistic basis for modern nations has enabled him to go beyond that to explore the wider ethnic and citizenship dimensions of national identity. As a political scientist, he has concentrated on the many examples in Southeast Asia of colonial states seeking to become nation-states.

As he shows in this volume, it is not easy to generalize from these experiences so far. First, the variations are great because each of the ten states of Southeast Asia started out with different mixes of peoples and cultures. One of them, Thailand, actually succeeded in keeping its monarchy intact and sought to build a nation based on that traditional and respected symbol of unity. It is the only country in the region where

loyal subjects of the king formed the basis for sovereign nationhood. The others have quite different experiences. For example, in the five Indo-Chinese colonial territories, the Vietnamese were distinguishable not only from immigrant Chinese but also from the Lao, the Khmer, the Cham and the numerous montagnard peoples in the interior. The three Vietnamese lands could set aside the governance variations imposed by the French in Cochín-China, Annam and Tongking, but what they put in place was not acceptable to the peoples in Cambodia and Laos who had evolved their own national symbols. In the Philippines, it took centuries for different island groups to unite against colonial rule, and differences between indigenous Pinoys and the Chinoys (Chinese-Filipino) still remain; and there are even greater differences between the Christian majority and the various Muslim groups in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.

In the Malay states of the peninsula and the three northern Borneo states, remarkable efforts have been made to redefine an inclusive Malay identity as the foundation of Malay nationalism but the majority *bumiputra* (sons of the soil) have yet to satisfy the demands of large Chinese and Indian minorities to become equal citizens in the country of adoption to which they wish to offer loyalty. And in Burma (Myanmar), the problem was difficult enough with Indian and Chinese immigrants, but even more intractable was the division between the Burman majority and other equally indigenous peoples like the Shan, the Karen, the Kachin and others who remain doubtful about what should rightfully be the core of the country's identity. As for the numerous *suku* (tribes) of Indonesia and various immigrant Chinese, Arab and other settlers, so much depends on their respective relationships with the numerically dominant Javanese in their quest for uniting national symbols. Nevertheless, it is remarkable what the Indonesian nation has become, one of the most extraordinary nation-building stories of its kind in the 20th century.

As Professor Suryadinata shows, the alien idea of the nation-state came from the West, and ethnic and cultural similarities and differences in the region constitute only one part of the struggle for nationhood. Key factors have come from the colonial state that several of the new nations inherited. It is important to note that the colonial powers that ruled them

earlier were also very different from one another and the structure and processes of government they left behind have each played a significant role in determining how the new nation-states progressed. For example, the British had a vast empire and never had enough of their own nationals to run their colonies. They were content with exercising ultimate authority both in Burma and the Malay States but depended a great deal on local elites, whether indigenous or immigrant, to help them. And, just prior to their departure in the 1960s, they devised the Greater Malaysia plan that ended with many political boundaries being changed in the course of a few years, including the pluralist city-state of Singapore and the Brunei royal nation. As can be imagined, with every change in national borders, new expectations of nationhood were produced.

The French also had a large empire but sought to exercise closer control over every aspect of government wherever they could and were thus much tougher on anything they thought was “anti-colonial” in their five Indochina administrations. For different reasons, both British and French imperial powers were eventually confronted by communist revolts and, in quite different ways, the idea of nation played a decisive role. In Vietnam, nationalism led the Vietnamese to victory. But, in Malaya, a Malay-centred nationalism acted against the Chinese-led movement.

For the Dutch empire, however, the Netherlands East Indies was the only one significant part left of what they once had, and their own nationals valued it and were actively involved in keeping their subjects under control. Thus the only way for their colonized peoples to challenge their rule was through rebellion and revolution, and the establishment of alternate sets of national ideals. And this had repercussions for the kind of political system that resulted. As for the outlier with two sets of imperial rulers, the Republic of the Philippines, its experiences were truly exceptional. It not only had a much longer period of political acculturation by Western mores but also two totally different degrees of tutelage prior to independence. This has made it into a very distinctive kind of nation in the region whose achievements are not always well-understood by its neighbours.

Professor Suryadinata has spent much of his life studying the modern polity called a nation. This volume brings together his thoughts on the

multiple aspects of that very elusive ideal. It will provide generations of students with a useful guide through the labyrinth of the new forces at work in our region. It therefore gives me great pleasure to welcome his contributions here.

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East Asian Institute
National University of Singapore
14th March 2013

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Leo Suryadinata

Introduction

For many years I have been interested in the issues of ethnicity, indigenism, nationhood and citizenship in Southeast Asia. I discovered that it was not easy to write a book on this topic. I began therefore by writing a few papers regarding these issues since the mid-1990s, and some of these have been published as articles. At the same time, I continued to collect materials related to these subjects and conducted fieldworks in several ASEAN countries. Nevertheless, due to my teaching and other responsibilities, my plan to compile these into a book, “ethnicity, indigenism, citizenship and nation-building in Southeast Asia,” did not materialize. In July 2002, I left National University of Singapore (NUS) and a month later I joined the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). But for the first two years, I was busy researching and writing on other topics and more mundane subjects, yet, I managed to find time to write a few more papers. Only after I left ISEAS and began my service as Director of Chinese Heritage Centre (2006–2013), did I eventually finish a rough draft of the book. However, I did not publish it immediately as I was not satisfied with some parts of the work. The manuscript became outdated and had to be revised. Towards the end of my directorship, I managed to update the manuscript and decided to get it published.

The issue of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia is one aspect of my research focus. And in this book, I have included the study of ethnic Chinese. Although I have included this ethnic group, the book is not about the ethnic Chinese *per se*. The ethnic Chinese form a significant part of the larger picture. I have attempted to address the general issues of ethnicity, indigenism, citizenship and nationhood in Southeast Asia, but I am of the view that the discussion on these issues will not be complete without addressing the ethnic Chinese.

Ethnicity, nationhood and citizenship are Western concepts and often lack exact equivalents in the eastern region — East Asia and Southeast Asia. However, there is no doubt that these concepts have been extremely influential, and in the 20th century, they have been adopted by Asian and Southeast Asian countries, where they have been used and developed by many scholars. Of course, when these concepts are applied to Asia and Southeast Asia, certain adjustments, or modifications, are required and therefore are not exactly identical with their Western counterparts.

As these concepts are controversial, there is no general agreement, but when writers/scholars write about these concepts, they have specific definitions in their minds, which are sometimes spelt out and sometimes not. When they are not spelt out, it is difficult for the readers to follow their arguments. But despite their ambiguity and controversy, these concepts are still used as they affect basic human thinking and behavior.

Ethnicity, race and nation are the basic concepts used for analyzing of human society, and ethnic/racial conflicts are often considered to be natural and unavoidable. Most of the new states, especially those of Southeast Asia, are multi-ethnic and multi-racial, and the leaders are of the view that they have to be integrated in order to have national unity. It is interesting to note that in the past, when Southeast Asian countries (except Thailand) were colonies, the colonial authorities ensured that the society remained divided. Nation-building was not a concern and the local population was encouraged to think along ethnic/racial lines. Only after achieving political independence has national integration as a state policy been introduced. Therefore “nation-building” was an experiment for many newly independent states as they have not been “taught” by their colonial masters. Understandably, there is a process of trial and error.

It is not easy to build a new nation on the ruins of the colonial system especially when the blueprint used was prepared during the colonial rule: this includes the boundaries of the states, the laws and regulations, the tradition and even the institutions. The new states were unable to completely overhaul the existing state and start afresh. The process of change has been gradual. In the power struggle among different ethnic/racial groups, some colonial legacies were intentionally preserved and even perpetuated by the new elites. Ethnic/racial inequality was kept in regulations and laws where indigenous populations received more “rights” than the

non-indigenous. Even citizenship, which was meant to be universal, was less universal in the Southeast Asian region, at least until very recently.

National integration, or building a new nation, is a continuous process. Many are of the view that with the exception of a few “ethno-states,” many “non-ethno states” (“multi-ethnic states”) are not likely to be able to complete the nation-building project, as the concept varies from period to period. Nevertheless, the concept of nation-building has never been abandoned, as it is believed that this is a prerequisite of “national unity.” At one time, “national integration” was perceived as a form of “political development.” In the past, nation was often seen as “mono-culture” but in the era of democracy and globalization, a multi-cultural nation is more acceptable. But what is a multi-cultural nation? Is a multi-cultural nation still a nation?

A multi-ethnic society is believed to be unstable provided that it remains a “plural society” rather than a “pluralistic society.” Therefore there are authors who advocate “value integration” rather than “monoculture” as a solution to national integration. Of course, managing multi-ethnic and multi-racial “nation-states” or societies is not based on national integration or nation-building alone. Many methods, including hegemony (e.g. ethnic hegemony), have been introduced, some with national integration underpinnings while others with the purpose of continuing separation. Due to the difficulty of achieving a conventional “nationhood,” some states prefer to stress citizenship or citizenship-building. The era of globalization often makes nation-building more problematic than in the past when the world was less integrated.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. The first chapter addresses the question of nation-building in the context of various sociological and political science theories/concepts, many of these theories and concepts being related to Southeast Asia. The second chapter discusses the origins and nature of ethnicity, statehood and nationhood in Southeast Asia as well as their relationships. Without a clear understanding of these basic concepts, terms and their relationships, it is impossible to appreciate the so-called nation-states in the region. But apart from the three concepts, there is also another relevant concept, i.e. citizenship; the third chapter examines the relationship between citizenship and nationhood, also in Southeast Asia. The last concept, indigenism, is not only relevant but also crucial in the context of nation-building in the region; the fourth chapter,

therefore, discusses the issue of indigenism and its complex relations with nationhood and citizenship.

Ethnic Chinese are an integral part of Southeast Asia; the story of Southeast Asian nation-building will not be complete without including this group. The fifth chapter therefore focuses on the position of ethnic Chinese in the context of Southeast Asian nations, their national identity and their problems. One of the issues is the problem of citizenship. The sixth chapter hence addresses the issue of China's citizenship laws and their impact on the ethnic Chinese and nation-building in the Southeast Asian region. To deepen our understanding, the next four chapters that follow address the issues of nation-building and citizenship-building in selected Southeast Asian countries, namely Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Nation-building and citizenship-building have been seen as the most suitable method to manage multi-ethnic societies. The concluding chapter assesses the progress of nation-building and citizenship-building in a globalizing Southeast Asia.

One characteristic of this book is that the discussion on citizenship is based on the citizenship laws of the Southeast Asian states. I believe that this approach is more useful for understanding concrete issues of nationhood and citizenship in the Southeast Asian context than discussing citizenship in abstract.

I am indebted to my honours students (in classes of the 1990s) and colleagues in the department of political science, NUS, colleagues at ISEAS and friends from other institutions. They are too many to be mentioned here. Nevertheless, I would like to record my special thanks to Lee Hock Guan of ISEAS and David Martin Jones, University of Queensland, for reading the first draft of this manuscript and making useful suggestions to improve it. Last but not least, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Wang Gungwu, who has been very kind to me and has rendered his help to me in many ways. His project on "History of Nation-Building" has reminded me of the significance of nation-building in Southeast Asia and indirectly compelled me to complete/revise this manuscript. I am also very grateful that he has written a foreword for this book. Of course, I alone take the responsibility for any views expressed and shortcomings existing in this book.

Leo Suryadinata

31 December 2013

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