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Identity Politics and Elections in Malaysia and Indonesia

Ethnic engineering in Borneo

Karolina Prasad

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Identity Politics and Elections in Malaysia and Indonesia

In recent social research, ethnicity has mostly been used as an explanatory variable. Only after it was agreed that ethnicity, in itself, is subject to change was it possible to answer the questions of how and why it changes. This multiplicity of ethnic identities requires that we think of each society as one with multiple ethnic dimensions, of which any can become activated in the process of political competition – and sometimes several of them within a short period of time.

Focusing on Malaysia and Indonesia, this book traces the variations of ethnic identity by looking at electoral strategies in two sub-national units. It shows that ethnic identities are subject to change – induced by calculated moves by political entrepreneurs who use identities as tools to maximize their chances of winning elections or expanding support base – and highlights how political institutions play an enormous role in shaping the modes and dynamics of these ethno-political manipulations. This book suggests that in societies where ethnic identities are activated in politics, instead of analyzing politics with ethnic distribution as an independent variable, ethnic distribution can be taken as the dependent variable, with political institutions being the explanatory one. It examines the problems of voters' behaviour, and parties' and candidates' strategy in a polity that is, to a significant extent, driven by ethnic relations.

Pushing the boundaries of qualitative research on Southeast Asian politics by placing formal institutions at the centre of its analysis, this book will be of interest to students and scholars of southeast Asian politics, race and ethnic studies and international relations.

Karolina Prasad gained a PhD from Hamburg University, Germany in 2013, after carrying out extensive research in Borneo. She also graduated with an MA in political science from Warsaw University, Poland, in 2006.

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1 Theories, institutions and ethnicity

1.1 Ethnicity and politics

For most of the 20th century, two major themes occupied students of ethno-politics: the first was the theoretical debate on the nature of ethnicity itself and the contents of the concept. The second theme was the practical question of how to design state institutions to eliminate the presumably destructive forces of ethnic diversity. The former problem, typically presented in the literature as a dispute between "primordialists", who see ethnic identity as single and fixed, and "constructivists", to whom ethnic identity is multidimensional and fluid, was finally declared as solved by Brubaker, who pronounced primordialism "a long dead horse" (1996, 15).[1] The latter issue of institutional design has been dealt with in a plethora of empirical studies, both qualitative and quantitative, but the results so far have been less than satisfactory, and there is no clear answer to the question of what institutional setting could ultimately minimize the chance of occurrence of conflict in plural societies. The mere assumption that multiethnic states are more prone to conflicts and politically less stable than (relatively) homogeneous states (Horowitz 1985; Rabushka and Shepsle 2009) rests on a premise that is in discordance with the newest findings of empirical studies (Brubaker and Laitin 1998; Davidson 2008a).

Despite the first theme seemingly being closed[2] and the second hardly lending itself to any hope of solution, this work nevertheless attempts to contribute to the two debates, and does it for two reasons. Foremost, eliminating primordialist elements from the ethno-theoretic discourse did not mean that the constructivist camp agreed on at least the most basic properties and dynamics of change of ethnic identities. Some new theoretical propositions that have arisen from the constructivist triumph over primordialism are promising but they are yet to be tested in confrontation with real-life phenomena. Therefore, the explanatory power of Rogers Brubaker's (1996, 2004) and Kanchan Chandra's (2004, 2008, 2012b) concepts, as two of the potentially most powerful conceptual tools in ethnic studies, will be assessed here.

Because, as Brubaker's argument goes, "ethnic groups" are neither "substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed" nor "unitary collective actors with common purposes" (2002, 163), "group" is hardly a useful concept for political analysts. Brubaker's work has liberated the discussion on identity from

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