Keynote Address

Multiculturalism in Island South-East Asian

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As postcolonial nations, the boundaries of countries in island Southeast Asia were determined and delineated by the respective colonial administrations prior to political independence. Consequently, the territorial boundaries approximately correspond with the territorial limits under colonial tutelage. Within these territories are to be found indigenous colonized population and resident immigrant populations encouraged by the economic opportunities provided by colonization. As postcolonial nations, these countries are unavoidably ‘multiracial’ or ‘multiethnic’, and thus ‘multicultural’, by their colonial legacies. Each of these countries has transformed this demographic and geographic reality into part of the national ideology and political practice, in respective ways that are historically overdetermined. This paper will attempt to place these three cases within a larger theoretical framework of multiculturalism and call for political adjustments in the three polities.

Introduction

My concern for this occasion is to explore a framework for the analysis of ‘multiculturalism’ in the context of island Southeast Asia, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, because each has made use of ‘multiculturalism’ under various codes. In Indonesia, ‘Bhinneka Tunggal Ika’ (Unity in Diversity) is the national motto, in Malaysia, although the political primacy of the indigenous Malay population is constitutionally guaranteed, the ruling coalition is of political parties organized along ethnic lines, and in Singapore, the constitution and the national pledge declare the nation as a multiracial society based on equality. In all these instances, a form of ‘multiculturalism’ is enshrined as part of the ‘national ideology’. The idea of multiculturalism is thus of a deeper and longer history in Southeast Asia than the current popularity of the idea of ‘multiculturalism’ in the politics of some developed countries, such as Australia and Canada, which have declared themselves multicultural nations in the early 1970s, and also in the emerging academic discipline of Cultural Studies. These latter developments, significantly, provide us with some comparative analytic distance to think the concept and its attendant practices in our own Southeast Asian context.

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Multiculturalism as ideology

Arguable, in the contemporary world where capitalism has triumphed, without challenging alternative imaginations of social and economic configurations in sight, every country is in a fundamental sense ‘multicultural’ in terms of class and gender. Add to this the easy flow and exchange of migrants, legal and illegal, it may be the case that empirically every nation in this globalized world is demographically multiracial, multi-religious and ‘multicultural’. Class and gender multiculturalisms are intrinsically political because they are the manifestations of the social and political inequalities that result from the capitalist structures. On the other hand, a multiracial population need not be political because the biology of race is not intrinsically political; however, racial difference can be and are readily mobilized to create social and political inequalities, race thus rendered political; witness the rise of anti-immigrant politics in Europe and Australia and the coercive ejection of White farmers in Zimbabwe by those who claim to be ‘indigenous’ in the respective locations.

Accordingly, multiculturalism as an empirical social reality is a resource that can be transformed into an ideology, a process in which the historicity of an empirical reality is suppressed and the ‘reality’ itself read as ‘nature’. This is a classic instance of what Marxists, from Lukacs to Roland Barthes to Louis Althusser, have analyzed as the process of ‘naturalization of the historical’. Its political effectiveness lies in the distinction between history and nature: history is the accumulation of human activities and thus subject to ongoing human interventions and can be changed, while ‘nature’ may be harnessed and utilized by human activities but is ultimately not subject to changes by human actions. To read historical processes as ‘nature’ is to suppress analysis and understanding, the better to ‘mystify’ the processes for political purposes. In multiculturalism as ideology, the demographic reality of many races sharing a delineated geographical boundary is exempt from its historical analysis but simply serves as a contemporary ‘alibi’ for a politics in its name; multiracialism has been and continues to be the excuse for discriminating public policies. Fortunately, there is no ideology that is so hegemonic that it does not produce its own other(s); ‘multiculturalism’ as an ideology which uses the demographic reality of multiple races as its reference in turn allows for different political positions to be taken in its name.

I am interested in two broad positions that are available namely, multiculturalism as an official discourse and multiculturalism as a discourse from the ground, or from the civil society. Obviously, the selection of these two positions for analysis is not accidental; the two are contesting positions and the outcomes of the contest are consequential.

Multiculturalism as official discourse

Being postcolonial nations, the current national boundaries of the three countries in question approximately correspond with the territorial limits under colonial tutelage and contain indigenous colonized populations and resident immigrant populations encouraged by the economic opportunities that colonization provided. By the colonial legacies, these nations are ‘multiracial’ or ‘multiethnic’ and multi-religious thus ‘multicultural’, which has been transformation into respective ideology of multiculturalism in each case.
Basic to the conception of ‘multiracialism/multiculturalism’ is the idea of the equality of groups rather than of individuals. Thus cultural rights of different racial groups are emphasized and theoretically, protected by law or at least by administrative practice. Among the three nations, the most obvious case is that of Singapore: there are four official languages, each school going child is required to take English plus his/her ‘mother tongue’ language, which is in fact generally the father’s language as the child is assigned the father’s race; two holidays of each racial/religious group, as often race and religion are coextensive, such as Malay/Muslim and Indian/Hindu, are assigned as national holidays per year; the distribution of the races in public housing estates, in which 80 per cent of the population reside, is controlled by quota at the level of each block of housing. Significantly, while cultures of the races are institutionally supported at the group level, the market rules in the allocation of resources of education and jobs in the public sector; meritocracy is the rule and material success individualized.

In Malaysia, until the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1969, the social and cultural arrangements were essentially the same as in Singapore, except in the political sphere. In contrast to multiracial political parties in Singapore, political parties in Malaysia have always been organized along racial lines. The Malays have never lost their claim to be the indigenous population. The system of sultanates, the pre-colonial political structure, was largely left intact, if only symbolically and nominally. Citizenship for resident and local-born Chinese and Indians were only granted after political independence in 1957. The practical arrangement at the time was for the formation of a coalition of three race-based political parties—the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA)—to form the majority federal government and most provincial governments. In 1969, race riots broke out when the general election results appeared to threaten Malay political dominance. In its aftermath, the ‘necessary’ dominance, politically and economically, of the Malays in their own ‘homeland’ was entrenched institutionally in the NEP. Racial quota which privilege Malays were imposed on places in universities, jobs in the civil service, allocation of government contracts and shares of government-owned companies and preferential bank loans for businesses and consumption. Privileging the Malays is, of course, concurrently disadvantaging of the others. In this sense, after 1969 until now, neither group nor individual equality applies in all government controlled sectors.

In Indonesia, ‘unity’ had been the preoccupation of the nation building project since independence, legal and administrative protection of ‘diversity’ of different groups have taken a back seat with very elusive substance. This preoccupation was further institutionalized after 1965, when the Panca Sila in which ‘national unity’ is explicitly codified and ‘diversity’ noticeable by its absent; was elevated as the ‘supreme’ national philosophy. Of course, it could be argued that ‘tolerance’ of diversity was implied but historically it was clear that Panca Sila was enounced as a way to avoid group politics, particularly to contain ‘collective’ demands of Muslims for an Islamic state. Consequently, it is framed in terms of ‘universality’ of the values as a means of avoiding the raising of group rights among the different religious and ethnic groups that inhabits the vast archipelago.

It could be said that the presence of multiracial and multiethnic groups has been given very high level of visibility in all three countries. This very visibility facilitates a certain politics of
multiculturalism: the presence of multiracial and multiethnic groups is read positively as richness of cultural inheritance, thus a multiculturalism of festivals, including cuisine, is promoted for locals to provide points of community identification and for tourists as ‘instant Asia’ or ‘truly Asia’; on the other hand, the very presence of racial and ethnic differences is treated as a potential source of tension and social disruptions that requires constant surveillance by the policing apparatus of the state. Racial or ethnic boundaries where the different groups make contact become sites for policing and social control, justified by the necessity to maintain ‘racial harmony’. Taking Singapore as an example, there is a string of policing authorities that serves to maintain racial harmony: the Internal Security Department, the Presidential Council on Racial Harmony, the Religious Harmony Act.

As the ‘risk’ of social disruption of racial harmony inherent logically within every discussion of race relations and no one can guarantee that disruption will not materialize, thus, the entire domain of race and ethnic relations is considered ‘sensitive’ and best not be raised publicly. Instances of race riots in the past are inscribed as part of the nation’s history and constantly recirculated in the media and as reminder of the potential rupture and its dire consequences. Public voicing of grievances within a discourse of race is often voluntarily suppressed and party voicing the grievances publicly are chastised by the political leaders, if not criminalized, on ground of being ‘racial chauvinists’ who threaten the racial harmony. As ‘racial harmony’ is a public good that no one can morally deny, such repressions find their ‘natural’ and ready justifications, leaving the power of the state unquestioned.

The constructed need to maintain racial harmony is part and parcel of the general strategy of social control that comes with the emphasis on group rights as part of the general collective well-being. While there are political justifications to emphasize collective and group well being over individual rights, as in an idea of communitarianism, there are, however, an easy slippage from such an emphasis to a generalized exercise of social and political repression. It is precisely this easy slippage that critics are skeptical about the claims of these three countries to be communitarian in political philosophy and that the ‘Asian Values’ discourse propounded by leaders of these nations, particularly Lee Kuan Yew and Mohammad Mahathir, are read by the critics as veils for authoritarianism.

Finally, the racial harmony that is achieved by generalized policing of race is but one of minimal tolerance, one in which the different racial groups accepts their differences without serious communication, let alone understanding, of the differences. This is a form of repressive tolerance. Once the repressive hands of the state is lifted for whatever reason, the potential disruption quickly materializes as inter-racial or inter-ethnic violence, as we have witnessed in various parts of Indonesia, in the aftermath of the collapse of the repressive New Order regime.

Within a comparative frame, the social and political costs of official multiculturalism as a device for generalized social control is now plain for all to see. The heavy repressive hand of the state may manage to suppress the public debate of ethnic and racial differences under a surface calm but is does not eliminate the conflicts that may result from contacts between the groups, which awaits their first opportunity to erupt violently. Given this possibility, a mechanism for the routine handling of differences publicly and peacefully would be preferred.
Multiculturalism as historical redress

In contrast to the maintenance of high visibility of multi-ethnicity and multiracialism so as to justify the use of race as a device of generalized social control, multiculturalism as it has been promoted by civil society in developed nations and academically by Cultural Studies and the political philosophical debate on communitarianism. There is a vast literature here that I will not be able to survey in this presentation, so I will radically summarize what are, to me, the main points. The emergence of multiculturalism as focus of political interest is grounded in the history of racial discriminations in the developed nations of the West. For example, it emerged in Canada as a response to the open challenges of the French-speaking to the dominance of English-speaking Canadians in the early 1970s. As a means of containing this development, Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau declared Canada to be a bilingual but multicultural nation. This ‘multicultural’ construction was then picked up by the Australian government as a turning-back of its earlier ‘White Australia’ policy.

In both instances, the emergence of multiculturalism as official policy is one of ‘redressing’ past historical injustices, where minority ethnic groups had to suppress their cultural identities and practices upon migration and acculturate themselves into the dominant group in the host country. Multiculturalism is thus a discourse of contestations for the rights to the recovery and preservation of the suppressed self and group identities. This is a primary political feature that motivates the promotion of multiculturalism in contemporary civil society and academic discourse.

Contain within this celebration of multiculturalism is, of course, the idea of group identity. Given the liberal democratic environment extant in the developed nations, the concern of the supporters of multiculturalism is not with the potential frictions at points of group contacts, because those problems are conceptually delegated to the concerns with racism of which multiculturalism is seen precisely as a corrective. So, unlike the Southeast Asian nations that police the racial boundaries, the concern is with the rights of the individual members versus the rights of the group. Here, liberal emphasis of individual rights has to square with the claims that a group can legitimately obtain from its individual members. The in principle ‘resolution’ of this issue divides the conservatives from the liberals, including liberal-communitarians.

The liberals demand the individual’s right to exit from the group. This would allow an individual to acquire or discard membership in the ethnic group when it suits their needs and benefits; it is a position that is inherently selfish and creates potentially a ‘free-rider’ problem, in which one benefits from group activities without paying any costs. This is precisely where the conservatives have their argument: a cost for membership can rightly be extracted from individual members in the interest of the well-being of the group, the most extremely example would be the right of the group to demand the members to come to its defense, with blood and life if necessary, this is the very basis of ethno-nationalism.

It is this position that scares the liberals who constitute the most ardent critics of the idea of community, ethnic, racial or otherwise, and the attendant communitarian philosophy. This is one reason why in countries where liberalism is the dominant discourse, the governments are reluctant to declare a policy of ‘multiculturalism’, in spite of the latter’s empirical presence.
Some resolution in Southeast Asian Nations?

It should be apparent that the conservative position is arguably closer to the politics of multiculturalism that characterizes the Southeast Asian polities in question. Here every individual is ‘ethnicized’ or ‘racialized’, officially at birth, and coerced by different policies, including citizenships, to stay within their assigned group boundaries, and suffer the groups’ relative advantages and discriminations. The cases of the three Southeast Asian countries in question are therefore not outside the larger theoretical discourse of multiculturalism, rather they occupy a very identifiable position in this discourse.

Obviously, neither the liberal nor the conservative positions are wholly good or wholly negative. Obviously, one would certainly want to enable an individual the rights to escape the oppressiveness of the group, if only precisely to check the potential of the expansion of generalized group oppression. Equally, one would want the group to have some claim on its individual members, if only for the continuing survival of the group, lest the group becomes an empty category. I would suggest that like all political issues, there is no in-principle solutions, rather resolutions are worked out in situ at every instance when conflicting demands arise.

To the extent that ‘belonging’ to the group is important to its individual members—materially, psychologically, culturally and socially, even politically—the latter are likely to pay the price of membership in practice. To the extent that the emphasis on collective well-being of the group needs to be checked in its potential excessiveness, the rights of exit for individual members should be maintained; otherwise the injustices of oppressions are not too far behind the veil of collective well-being. The balance between these demands is, as they say, the art of politics. In the three Southeast Asian countries in question, given their histories of multicultural politics to the present, perhaps, the introduction of some measures of the language of historical redress for minority groups and the rights of individual to exit from their assigned ethnic and racial group is of immediate greater priority.