

REVIEW ESSAY

Identity Politics in Contemporary Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Identity politics emerged as a central phenomenon in contemporary Southeast Asia, which is in keeping with the region's diversity and heterogeneity. The various ethnic and religious communities in the region have different historical experiences and cultural traditions that shape their identities and political aspirations. Identity politics has also provided empowerment and social justice for marginalised communities, such as indigenous and ethnic minorities. However, it has also resulted in conflict and violence as competing groups vie for political power and resources. This study finds that religion has played a significant role in identity politics in Southeast Asia. The region has various religions, including Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and animism. Religious identity has often been mobilised for political purposes, either as a means of asserting power or as a source of resistance against dominant groups. The article highlights the different strategies that different countries in the region have adopted to address identity politics. Some have attempted to promote national unity and inclusiveness, while others have taken a more authoritarian approach, suppressed dissent, and imposed strict controls on civil society and media. The article concludes by suggesting that a more nuanced and context-specific approach is needed to address identity politics in Southeast Asia. A complex interplay of variables will determine Southeast Asia's future course of identity politics. As the region continues to expand and transform, it is necessary to balance the interests of various groups and the broader objective of regional cohesion and stability.

Keywords: Politics; Southeast Asia; Political Identity; Religion; Ethnic

Introduction

Identity politics is a vital topic in Southeast Asia. The region is home to hundreds of different ethnic and religious groups, each with its unique cultural traditions and beliefs (Azuma, 2021; Bautista, 2010; Fleschenberg & Baumann, 2020; Heryanto, 2013; Jereza, 2016; Kingston, 2019; Tagliacozzo, 2009; Wolters, 1994). Often, these groups have been marginalised by the dominant political and social institutions. As a result, many Southeast Asian people have turned to identity politics to express their dissatisfaction and rights. It has led to conflicts within and between communities and new demands for political representation and cultural recognition. This article explores the role of identity politics in Southeast Asia, examining its origins, impact, and prospects. Southeast Asia's identity politics may be traceable back to the colonial period, when European forces partitioned the region into numerous governments, frequently ignoring ethnic and cultural boundaries (Boudreau, 2002; Philpott, 2013). The forced assimilation of different groups into the dominant culture created tensions, leading to longstanding grievances that continue to this day.

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109

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In recent years, identity politics has emerged as a powerful force in many Southeast Asian countries, including Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Beeson & Jayasuriya, 2009; Byun, 2021; Chang, 2005; Liu & Selway, 2021; Niezen, 2004). Ethnic and religious tensions have been highlighted through language policy, religious freedom, and claims to ancestral lands. In addition, identity politics has also influenced political developments in the region. In Indonesia, for example, the fall of the authoritarian regime led to the rise of regional governments that represented the interests of particular ethnic and religious groups. Malaysia's dominant Malay Muslim community has insisted on affirmative action policies preserving cultural and economic advantages.

The impact of identity politics has been both positive and negative. On the one hand, it has given voice to marginalised groups and enabled them to assert their rights. On the other hand, it has also pitted different communities against each other and contributed to sectarian violence. Despite its challenges, identity politics in Southeast Asia is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The region's ethnic and cultural diversity remains a potent force, and the desire for recognition and representation will continue to shape political and social developments in the future (Beeson & Jayasuriya, 2009; Boudreau, 2002; Chang, 2005; Kong, 2007; Philpott, 2013; Prasad, 2000; Stubbs, 2002). Finding ways to accommodate these differences while promoting unity and a common purpose will continue to be a critical challenge for regional policymakers.

Political Identity: Revisited

Identity politics is the political movement that focuses on the interests and perspectives of groups with shared characteristics or experiences, such as race, gender, sexuality, religion, and culture (Agius & Keen, 2018; Béland, 2017; Bird, 2004; Burke & Stets, 2009; Evans et al., 2022; Gellner, 1995; Parekh, 2008; Rapoport & Yemini, 2020; Shoemaker, 2006). Rather than viewing individuals as autonomous beings, identity politics highlights how broader social structures and power dynamics shape individual experiences and identities.

Identity politics has its roots in the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s (Al Tamimi, 2018; Kolig et al., 2009; Schnabel & Hjerm, 2014). These movements emphasised how systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination were deeply ingrained in American society and culture. From there, identity politics has evolved into a broader movement that seeks to empower marginalised groups, challenge oppressive social structures, and promote social justice. The 1960s civil rights movements in the United States, which aimed to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans, played a significant role in the emergence of identity politics. These movements, led by figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, advocated for greater recognition, rights, and representation for disenfranchised Black communities (Fukuyama, 2004, 2006, 2014; Tebble, 2006).

This understanding of intersectionality and the need to address multiple forms of marginalisation gave rise to the identity politics movement. It recognises that social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion impact a person's experiences and opportunities in life. Furthermore, identity politics can often be a divisive issue, with some people seeing it as a way to promote inclusivity and diversity and others viewing it as a way to further divide society based on differences. However, those who support identity politics argue that it is necessary to recognise the experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups in order to address systemic inequalities and create a more just society (Fish et al., 2021; Ineese-Nash, 2020; Li, 2000).

Ultimately, understanding identity politics requires recognising the complex ways in which individual identity intersects with more extensive social structures and power dynamics. It

also involves difficult questions about group identity, political representation, and social inequality.

Historical Context of Identity Politics in Southeast Asia

Identity politics is the tendency of individuals or groups to organise politically around their shared identity traits, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and religion (Beeson & Jayasuriya, 2009; Moran, 2018). In Southeast Asia, identity politics has a long history that stretches back to the colonial period when European powers introduced new ideas about race and ethnicity to the region (Byun, 2021; Chang, 2005; Kong, 2007; Liu & Selway, 2021; Philpott, 2013). These ideas were used to justify colonial rule and create hierarchies of power, with Europeans at the top and the various indigenous groups at the bottom (Prianti, 2019; Ysk et al., 2002). During the post-World War II period, many countries in the region won their independence from colonial powers, and with it came a new era of nation-building. These newly formed nations often comprised diverse populations with ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Governments in these countries struggled to create a unifying national identity that could bind these diverse groups together.

Crucially, identity politics remained a prevalent feature of the region's politics. Religious identity has often been a focus of political conflict in places like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, where large Muslim populations coexist with a predominantly Christian population (Anam, 2019; Beh, 1988; Berenschot, 2015; Houben, 2003; Jonsson, 2022; Jory, 2007; Kelly et al., 2007; Manguin, 2008; Niezen, 2004; Reid, 2009; Weatherbee, 2012). For example, ethnic groups such as the Acehnese in Indonesia or the Karen in Myanmar are fighting for more political autonomy and acknowledgement of their cultural difference, and they have been motivated in large part by their ethnic identities.

In recent years, identity politics has become more important since globalisation and cultural homogenisation have destroyed traditional identities and caused cultural displacement (Chong, 2007; Herzig, 2016; Hulsbosch et al., 2009). For instance, social media has promoted identity-based messaging and allowed marginalised communities to mobilise and speak out politically. Social media has also changed how individuals communicate and establish communities, enabling virtual spaces to share experiences, viewpoints, and ideas. It has created a more varied and inclusive public sphere where marginalised groups may discuss and shape policies that impact them. Many "identity politics" movements emphasise the political and social significance of personal identification qualities like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and more. As globalisation and cultural homogenisation increase, people feel displaced, making identity politics increasingly important. As people lose their conventional identity, they emphasise specific components of their identity to assert their distinctiveness. Social media has helped marginalised communities mobilise and express their political voice by spreading identity-based messages.

Importantly, globalisation and cultural homogenisation have made identity politics increasingly prominent in recent years. Social media has given underprivileged communities a political voice and a sense of community. Southeast Asian identity politics is complicated and multifaceted. The region's contentious political landscape stems from colonialism, nation-building, and globalisation (Anderson, 1991; Knapman, 2006; Maleševic, 2006; Nesadurai, 2017; Prasad, 2000; Vecchi et al., 2021; Ysk et al., 2002).

The historical context of identity politics in Southeast Asia can be traced back to the colonial period when European powers divided the region into various territories and imposed their own cultural and political systems. These divisions created artificial national borders, which resulted in the fragmentation and marginalisation of local ethnic groups (Jory, 2007; Maleševic, 2006; Tagliacozzo, 2009).

After achieving independence, many Southeast Asian nations faced the challenge of constructing their own national identities, which often involved the suppression of minority cultures and religions. The drive towards homogenisation and assimilation led to the rise of ethnic and religious nationalism, as different groups sought to preserve their identities and resist assimilation. Subsequently, as the region became increasingly connected and integrated with the global economy, the pressures of globalisation also influenced identity politics. Globalisation has spread cultural and political ideas, challenging and reinforcing local identities. The rise of neoliberal economic policies has also generated new forms of social inequality and marginalisation, further fuelling identity-based movements. Thus, the historical context of identity politics in Southeast Asia is complex and multifaceted, involving a range of factors such as colonialism, nation-building, and globalisation. These factors have contributed to the region's diverse and often contentious political landscape and continue to shape identity politics today.

Ethnic and Religious Identities in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a diverse region comprised of various ethnic and religious communities. The region boasts a myriad of cultures, traditions, and religions, which are unique and distinct. Ethnic and religious identities have significantly shaped Southeast Asia's history, politics, and society (Fish et al., 2021; Jory, 2007; Knapman, 2006; Malešević, 2006; Prasad K., 2016; Tagliacozzo, 2009).

Ethnic identities in Southeast Asia vary greatly, with hundreds of different groups scattered across the region. Even though there is much variety, some countries have one or two dominating ethnic groups. For instance, the Malays are the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, whereas the Javanese are the largest ethnic group in Indonesia. Other notable ethnic groups in the region include the Chinese, Indians, and Filipinos. The ethnic identities of these communities have been influenced by their cultural practices, history, and geographic location.

Moreover, Southeast Asia is home to various ethnic groups with different cultural practices, languages, and histories. The diversity of ethnic identities in this region results from centuries of migration, trade, colonisation, and intermarriage. These ethnic identities are recognised and celebrated in Southeast Asia through festivals, traditions, and cultural arts. For example, the Malays make up more than half of the country's population. They are primarily Muslim and speak Malay, the country's official language. The Javanese have the largest population of any Southeast Asian country. They speak Javanese, one of the nation's prominent languages (Prasad K., 2016; Spiegel, 2010).

The ethnic identities of these communities have been influenced by various factors, including the country's history, geography, and cultural practices (Jory, 2007; Malešević, 2006; Prasad K., 2016). For example, the Malays have a strong sense of cultural identity due to their long history in Malaysia. In contrast, the Chinese have maintained their cultural traditions through their diaspora across Southeast Asia. The Indian community, meanwhile, has been influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam while also being shaped by the colonial legacy of British rule. Therefore, the ethnic identities of Southeast Asia are diverse and complex, with hundreds of different groups scattered throughout the region. While there are some dominant ethnic groups in certain countries, such as the Malays and Javanese, the region is also home to significant Chinese, Indian, Filipino, and other minority groups. These different ethnic identities have been shaped by various factors, including history, geography, and cultural practices, and are celebrated and recognised throughout the region.

Similarly, religion has been an important influence in the development of the history and culture of this region. Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia adhere primarily to Islam, while

Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia follow primarily to Buddhism. Islam is the predominant religion of Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Mukrimin, 2012). Even in Bali, Indonesia, and the Philippines, where the Christian population is very small, Hinduism is the dominant religion. Religion has affected many facets of life in Southeast Asia, including the region's social, political, and economic institutions. Traditions and customs have been particularly susceptible to this religious sway.

Indeed, religion has profoundly impacted the development of Southeast Asian culture and history. The region has many religious beliefs, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and many local religions. Islam is the predominant religion in Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which Arab traders and Muslim preachers introduced in the 13th century (Salim & Azra, 2003). The spread of Islam in Southeast Asia was gradual and peaceful, with the local people embracing the faith over time (Hefner, 1997). Furthermore, Buddhism is the main religion in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. Its influence can be seen in the magnificent temples, shrines, and stupas that dot the landscape in these countries. The Buddhist faith also influences the way people live and interact with each other, with values such as compassion, kindness, and tolerance being highly regarded.

Furthermore, Hinduism, on the other hand, has had a lasting impact on the culture and art of Bali, Indonesia, where it was introduced in the 1st century AD through Indian traders. Bali is known for its stunning Hindu temples, colourful festivals, and unique performing arts. On the other hand, the Philippines was colonised by the Spanish in the 16th century, and Christianity became the predominant religion. Today, the country's Catholic population remains the largest in Southeast Asia (Herzig, 2016; Lombard, 1995; Tagliacozzo, 2009). As a result, religion has influenced various aspects of Southeast Asian life, from traditions and customs to political and economic structures. Religious festivals and rituals are essential to national culture and identity in many countries. For example, the Lunar New Year celebrated by Chinese communities, the Songkran Festival in Thailand, and the Diwali Festival in India are all religious festivals celebrated across the region.

Religion has also contributed to the political and economic structures of the region. In some countries, religious leaders have been prominent figures in society, and their influence has extended beyond spiritual matters to politics and governance. For example, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), a conservative Islamic organisation, has influenced public policy in Indonesia (Arifianto, 2017; Niam, 2017). Thus, religion has profoundly impacted Southeast Asia, shaping its culture, traditions, and political structures. The region's diverse religious beliefs add to its richness and complexity and provide a unique insight into the history and development of Southeast Asian societies.

The interaction between ethnicity and religion in Southeast Asia has been complex. In some cases, religious differences have led to conflicts between ethnic groups, as seen in the ongoing conflicts in southern Thailand between the Buddhist Thai state and Muslim ethnic Malays. However, religion has been a unifying force in other cases, bringing together different ethnic groups (Mukherjee, 2013; Southgate, 2021; Valjakka, 2021). For example, Islam has been crucial in establishing a shared identity among various ethnic groups in Malaysia and Indonesia. Therefore, ethnic and religious identities have significantly shaped Southeast Asia's history, culture, and society. The region's diversity has allowed for a rich and unique blend of various cultural practices, traditions, and religions, making it one of the most fascinating regions in the world.

Political Implications of Identity Politics in Southeast Asia

Identity politics is a political matter that emphasises the interests of a certain group based on their shared identity, such as ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. In Southeast Asia, identity politics has substantially influenced the political evolution of

numerous nations (Boudreau, 2002; Fukuyama, 2006; Lefaan, 2021; Tebble, 2006). Identity politics in Southeast Asia has various and complex political repercussions, ranging from democratisation to political polarisation.

Democratisation

Identity politics has been vital in advancing democracy in Southeast Asia (Berenschot et al., 2017; Freedman, 2007; Grzywacz, 2020; Knapman, 2006; Vatikiotis, 1996; Weatherbee, 2012). Movements that emerged from identity politics have mobilised people to protest against authoritarian regimes and demand democratic reforms. For example, in the Philippines, the People Power Revolution of 1986, which ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos, was fuelled by popular discontent over his discriminatory policies against ethnic minorities and Muslim communities. Similarly, the democratisation process in Indonesia was driven by the movements of ethnic and religious minorities. Today, identity-based parties and movements continue to promote democratic values, human rights, and justice actively.

Furthermore, democratisation deals with how a society becomes more democratic. In other words, it is the transition from an authoritarian or undemocratic system to a more participatory, representative, and accountable political system. Democratisation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that involves both institutional changes, such as the introduction of free and fair elections, the rule of law, and constitutional protections for individual rights and freedoms, as well as cultural and social changes, such as the emergence of civic culture, civil society organisations, and democratic values and norms.

On the other hand, identity politics refers to how social groups define their identities and interests concerning race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, or other forms of difference. Identity politics can be divisive and empowering, depending on how it is practiced and mobilised. On the one hand, identity politics can lead to hostility and conflicts between different groups, as each group seeks to defend its interests and assert its cultural and political identity. On the other hand, identity politics can also be a tool for mobilising marginalised and oppressed groups to demand their rights and recognition and to challenge the dominant narratives of power and privilege.

I argue that in Southeast Asia, identity politics has been crucial in advancing democracy, particularly in authoritarian regimes that often use ethnic or religious cleavages to divide and rule. Identity-based movements and parties have challenged these practices and demanded greater inclusion, representation, and participation in the political system. The People Power Revolution in the Philippines and the democratisation process in Indonesia are two examples of the power of identity politics to mobilise people and bring about democratic reforms. For example, in the Philippines, for instance, the People Power Revolution of 1986 was fuelled by widespread discontent over the discriminatory policies of the Marcos dictatorship against ethnic minorities and Muslim communities. The protesters who gathered in the streets of Manila to demand Marcos' ouster were united by a shared vision of a more just and inclusive society that respected the rights and dignity of all citizens, regardless of their cultural or religious backgrounds. The legacy of the People Power Revolution continues to inspire and inform democratic movements and struggles in the Philippines and beyond (Boudreau, 2002; Lefaan, 2021; Nesadurai, 2017; Rum, 2020; Tebble, 2006).

Similarly, in Indonesia, the democratisation process was driven by the movements of ethnic and religious minorities who had long been excluded from the political and social mainstream. The fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 paved the way for a more open and participatory political system in which identity-based parties and movements could compete for power and influence. Today, Indonesia has a vibrant civil society sector, with

numerous NGOs, grassroots organisations, and activist groups working to promote democratic values, human rights, and justice.

Therefore, identity politics has played a crucial role in advancing democracy in Southeast Asia by mobilising marginalised and oppressed groups to demand their rights and recognition and challenging the hegemony of authoritarian regimes that seek to divide and rule through ethnic or religious cleavages. However, identity politics can also be a double-edged sword, sometimes leading to group divisions and conflicts. Therefore, the challenge for democratic activists and movements is to harness the power of identity politics while promoting solidarity, inclusiveness, and mutual respect.

Political Polarisation

Identity politics has also contributed to political polarisation in some Southeast Asian countries. Political polarisation occurs when a society is divided into ideological or identity-based camps that compete for power and resources (Iyengar et al., 2012; Vecchi et al., 2021). In countries where identity politics has become entrenched, political debates revolve around ethnic, religious, or gender issues, often at the expense of other political agendas, such as economic development or social welfare. Such polarisation can lead to political instability, social tension, and conflict (Nuraniyah, 2020). For example, in Thailand, the political divide between the traditional elites and the populist movements of the poor and rural regions has led to frequent protests and violence.

Political polarisation can lead to the increasing divide between different political factions within a society, where individuals and groups diverge on political ideologies, values, and beliefs (Müller-Crepon, 2022; Vecchi et al., 2021). In the case of Southeast Asia, identity politics has played a significant role in exacerbating political polarisation. Frequently, identity politics is used to mobilise political support based on ethnicity, religion, gender, or other identity markers. In Southeast Asian countries, identity politics has been used by political leaders and activists to attract support and gain power. However, this has also led to the creation of identity-based factions and the dissolution of shared national identity. For example, in Malaysia, politicians have used Islam as a political tool to gain support, leading to the marginalisation of other religious and ethnic groups.

Moreover, political polarisation has caused societal conflict, violence, and tension (Iyengar et al., 2012; Müller-Crepon, 2022; Somer & McCoy, 2018; Vecchi et al., 2021). The political split between Thailand's conventional elites and populist movements of the poor and rural has led to numerous uprisings, coups, and violence. The growing divergence between orthodox and liberal Muslims in Indonesia has caused religious intolerance and tension. Polarisation can also hamper democratic processes like compromise and cooperation and damage faith in institutions and leaders. It can cause political instability and social and economic stagnation. Therefore, political polarisation in Southeast Asian countries must be addressed to deepen democracy, reduce social tensions, and promote socio-economic success. Political leaders must transition from identity-based politics to policies that benefit all citizens, unite the nation, and build democratic trust. Southeast Asian political polarisation hinders democratic development and consolidation. It splits society into political factions with distinct values and views.

Identity politics, which appeals to ethnic, religious, and cultural identities to obtain support, is historically a major cause of political polarisation in Southeast Asia. Identity politics can foster group rivalry and promote inequality and injustice. Thus, political leaders must prioritise policies that benefit all citizens, promote national unity, and build trust in democratic institutions to reduce political polarisation. Identity-based politics must give way to social cohesiveness, equitable chances, and inclusive development.

Southeast Asian socio-economic success requires democratic strengthening. Democracy empowers citizens to participate in decision-making, making governance more responsive and responsible. It can boost economic growth, social welfare, and human development. Social tensions must be reduced for regional stability and security. Political division can cause violence and jeopardise regional stability. Political leaders can lessen social unrest and improve regional stability by encouraging national unity and social cohesiveness. Political polarisation must be addressed to strengthen democratic processes, reduce social tensions, and promote socio-economic progress in Southeast Asia. Political leaders must transition from identity-based politics to policies that benefit all citizens, unite the nation, and build democratic trust.

Ethnic and Religious Tensions

Identity politics can exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions in countries with diverse populations, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, or the Philippines (Knapman, 2006; Lluch, 2019; Malešević, 2006; Tagliacozzo, 2009). Without a solid national identity or inclusive political frameworks, identity-based groups may seek to protect their interests and demand autonomy or separation. It can lead to conflict between different groups, especially if they have competing claims over resources or cultural heritage. For instance, in Malaysia, the Malay-Muslim majority has often clashed with the ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities over issues such as affirmative action, language policy, or religious rights. Similarly, in the Philippines, historical tensions between the predominantly Catholic majority and Muslim minority in the southern part of the country have fueled conflict and separatist movements.

Religion plays a significant role in identity politics, as particular religious beliefs can shape cultural and political identities. In countries like Indonesia, where Islam is the dominant religion, religious tensions can arise between different sects of Islam and between Muslims and minority religious groups such as Christians or Hindus (Mukrimin, 2023). In India, tensions between Hindus and Muslims have led to violence and discrimination despite the country's secular constitution. Furthermore, religion plays a significant role in identity politics because it offers followers a sense of identity, community, and belongingness. Religion shapes our beliefs, values, and principles, impacting our cultural and political identities. Religious groups compete for recognition and resources in countries where religious diversity exists, leading to identity-based conflicts.

Religious tensions can arise for several reasons, such as differences in interpretation, ideological disputes, or historical grievances (Reid, 2015). These tensions can lead to conflicts between different sects of the same religion or between different religions. Such conflicts often result in violence, discrimination, and human rights violations, destabilising political and social structures. In Indonesia and elsewhere in the Southeast Asian region, religious tensions are prevalent due to their diverse religious landscapes. Despite being an Islamic country in Indonesia, different sects of Islam, such as Sunni and Shia, and minority religious groups, like Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists, coexist. However, conflicts arise due to political representation, social justice, and religious freedom issues.

Economic disparities and political inequalities can also exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions (Fox et al., 2009; Westra, 2020). For example, the Malay-Muslim majority holds disproportionate political and economic power in Malaysia, leading to tensions with other ethnic groups who feel marginalised. Similarly, in the Philippines, the Muslim minority in the south has long felt neglected by the central government, leading to demands for greater autonomy and even independence. Ethnic and religious tensions refer to the differences in beliefs, culture, race, and religion among various groups within a society. Various factors, including economic disparities and political inequalities, can trigger such tensions. One example is Malaysia, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country that has experienced

various tensions over the years. Malaysia has a Malay-Muslim majority, who hold disproportionate political and economic power. The political and economic power leads to other ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Indian communities, feeling marginalised and excluded from the country's mainstream socio-economic and political spheres. For instance, despite being the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, Chinese Malaysians are underrepresented in the government and public service sectors. It has led to feelings of exclusion and disenfranchisement among non-Malay groups in Malaysia, resulting in tension and conflicts within the society.

Another example is the Philippines, which has a large Muslim minority in the Southern region of Mindanao. The Muslim minority in the Philippines has long been neglected by the Central government, leading to demands for greater autonomy and even independence. The traditional political power structure in the Philippines is dominated by a Christian majority who hold political power in most regions, side-lining the Muslim minority. The issue has resulted in tensions and conflicts between the Muslim and Christian communities, with violent groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf seeking to gain independence for the Muslim-dominated regions (Borchers, 2014; Mukherjee, 2013; Rüländ, 2014; Southgate, 2021; Weatherbee, 2012).

Hence, socio-economic and political disparities have the potential to exacerbate racial and religious tensions within countries. Governments and policymakers are responsible for enacting policies that remove discrimination, promote inclusiveness, and increase political and economic representation. If this is not done, it may result in tensions and conflicts that have the potential to have long-lasting impacts on the society's peace and stability.

Overall, ethnic and religious tensions show how important it is to promote inclusive national identities and political frameworks that respect the rights of minorities and create channels for constructive discourse and the resolution of conflicts. If this is not done, it can lead to bloodshed and instability, as seen in numerous nations across Southeast Asia and beyond.

International Relations

Identity politics in Southeast Asia can have implications for international relations as well. Ethnic, religious, or linguistic similarities between countries or regions may strengthen cooperation and regional integration. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional organisation that aims to promote cooperation and economic development among its member states, some of which share similar cultural or religious backgrounds (Borchers, 2014; Indraswari, 2022; Rüländ, 2009, 2014; Rum, 2020).

International relations is a field of study that encompasses a wide range of disciplines, including politics, economics, history, sociology, and law. It concerns the interactions between nations, states, and other international actors, including non-state actors such as multinational corporations, international organisations, and civil society organisations. At this point, the study of how individuals and communities make claims about who they are about important social categories such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation is known as "identity politics." Relational dynamics in Southeast Asian states' political, social, and economic spheres have been heavily impacted by identity politics. Conversely, identity-based conflicts between countries or regions may lead to tensions and diplomatic disputes. For example, the maritime disputes in the South China Sea, which involve several Southeast Asian countries and China, are partly driven by identity-based narratives, such as historical claims or ethnic or linguistic affinity.

The implications of identity politics for international relations in Southeast Asia are manifold. On the one hand, shared identities and cultural affinities between countries can facilitate cooperation and reduce tensions. For example, ASEAN was founded partly on

regional solidarity and mutual support among Southeast Asian nations despite their many differences (Elliott, 2003; Mukherjee, 2013; Rüländ, 2014; Southgate, 2021; Stubbs, 2002; Weatherbee, 2012). On the other hand, identity-based conflicts can undermine cooperation and fuel tensions between countries. For example, the disputes over territorial claims in the South China Sea involve a complex mix of historical, cultural, and identity-based factors. Based on ancient maps and historical records, China has long claimed sovereignty over much of the sea. Some Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, have challenged these claims, arguing that they violate their rights to the waters and to the natural resources they contain. These disputes have, at times, escalated into military confrontations or diplomatic standoffs, highlighting the potential for identity-based narratives to fuel conflict in the region.

Subsequently, identity politics can have significant implications for international relations in Southeast Asia due to the diversity of cultures, languages, and religions (Agius & Keen, 2018; Ruckelshaus, 2022). Differences in ethnic and cultural identities can lead to conflicts, which, in turn, can hamper regional cooperation and development. At the same time, shared identities, such as linguistic or religious affiliations, can enhance regional solidarity and help forge bonds between nations (Pepinsky, 2013b, 2013a). A very recent example of implication is in the case of the South China Sea dispute, where China's claim to sovereignty over the sea is based on historical and cultural factors contested by Southeast Asian countries (Allan et al., 2018; Emmerson, 2017; Yennie Lindgren & Lindgren, 2017). The disputes over territorial claims exemplify how identity politics can fuel conflict in the region. The overlapping claims reflect different interpretations of history and identity and highlight the difficulty of reconciling national interests with regional cooperation.

Importantly, identity politics has positive and negative implications for international relations in Southeast Asia. Shared identities foster regional cooperation and solidarity, while identity-based conflicts undermine cooperation and fuel tensions. To promote regional stability and development, policymakers must acknowledge and address the underlying causes of identity-based conflicts and promote inclusiveness and respect for diversity. In this case, identity politics pertains to mobilising social and political movements based on shared characteristics, such as ethnicity, religion, language, and race. Southeast Asia's complex history and diverse cultures have resulted in numerous identity-based conflicts, ranging from secessionist movements in Mindanao and Aceh to tensions between ethnic groups in Myanmar and religious divides in Indonesia.

On the positive side, identity politics can enhance regional cooperation and solidarity. Countries that share similar identities can establish stronger bonds and resolve common issues. For instance, ASEAN has anchored its integration efforts on the region's shared identity as a Southeast Asian community with a shared cultural heritage, buoys the ASEAN member states' efforts to work together towards their common aspirations (Borchers, 2014; Indraswari, 2022; Mukherjee, 2013; Rüländ, 2009, 2014; Rum, 2020; Southgate, 2021; Stubbs, 2002; Weatherbee, 2012).

However, identity-based conflicts can undermine regional stability and fuel tensions, posing many challenges to regional cooperation. Conflicts arising from identity politics can increase political instability, violent unrest, and economic underdevelopment. For instance, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar has been a humanitarian disaster and a destabilising factor in the region due to its spillover effects in neighbouring countries.

At this point, the role of identity politics in Southeast Asia suggests that carefully navigating cultural and historical factors is vital to building solid and lasting relationships between countries in the region (Beh, 1988; Berenschot et al., 2017; Fleschenberg & Baumann, 2020; Moran, 2018; Reid, 2015; Schlehe, 2011; Vatikiotis, 1996; Weatherbee, 2012). At the same time, it underscores the importance of recognising and addressing persistent

inequalities and power imbalances often tied to social identities. By acknowledging how identity politics shape regional international relations, policymakers can work towards greater cooperation and understanding among nations while ensuring that diverse perspectives and voices are heard and respected.

Therefore, identity politics significantly impacts Southeast Asian politics and society. While it can promote democracy, social justice, and regional cooperation, it can also exacerbate tensions, fuel polarisation, and weaken national cohesion (Iyengar et al., 2012; Vecchi et al., 2021). To manage the challenges posed by identity politics, Southeast Asian countries need to adopt inclusive and participatory political systems that accommodate the diversity of their populations and foster common interests and values. It is mainly because identity politics closely deals with the political and social movements formed around a particular social or cultural identity, such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality. These movements seek to promote the interests, rights, and recognition of the group they represent, often at the expense of other groups or the broader societal and national interest. While identity politics has been present in Southeast Asia for many years, its impact has recently become more pronounced due to various factors such as globalisation, economic change, demographic shifts, and political mobilisation.

Identity politics can significantly impact Southeast Asian politics and society in several ways. On the one hand, it can promote democracy, social justice, and regional cooperation by empowering marginalised and underrepresented groups, increasing their political participation, and promoting their rights and interests (Bennett, 2012; Ray, 2003). For example, the indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand have organised themselves into political and social movements to demand their recognition, rights, and autonomy. Similarly, the women's movement in Southeast Asia has made significant strides in promoting gender equality, political representation, and legal reform.

On the other hand, identity politics can also exacerbate tensions, fuel polarisation, and weaken national cohesion. It is particularly true when political actors politicise, communalise, or instrumentalise identity-based conflicts to gain power or resources. Such conflicts can become violent and destabilising, leading to social fragmentation, internal displacement, and human rights violations. The Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the violence in southern Thailand, and communal tensions in Indonesia and the Philippines, for example, are all examples of identity-based conflicts that have damaged Southeast Asia's peace and stability.

To manage the challenges posed by identity politics, Southeast Asian nations must build open and participatory political systems that accommodate diversity and promote shared values to address identity politics. Promote inclusive citizenship, develop democratic institutions, defend human rights, and provide equitable access to resources and opportunities. Recognising and respecting the region's diverse identities and cultures while fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging that transcends local affinities. Dialogue, education, cultural exchange, and other social and political involvement that foster understanding and collaboration can achieve it. Managing identity politics requires recognising diversity, encouraging unity, and peacefully and democratically resolving identity-based claims and complaints.

To address identity politics, Southeast Asian nations must build inclusive and participatory political systems. These systems should accommodate diverse populations while promoting shared values. It promotes inclusive citizenship, democratic institutions, human rights, and equal access to resources and opportunities. In addition, it is crucial to acknowledge and respect the region's diverse identities and cultures while simultaneously fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging beyond specific relationships. It can be achieved through

discourse, education, cultural exchange, and other social and political activities that promote mutual understanding and collaboration. The key to managing identity politics is balancing variety and commonality while addressing identity-based claims and grievances democratically and non-violently.

Therefore, to promote regional stability and development, Southeast Asian nations must recognise the underlying causes of identity-based conflicts and focus on promoting inclusiveness and respect for diversity. Policymakers must solve religious and ethnic problems through dialogue, negotiation, and building trust between conflicting parties. Thus, identity politics can help and hurt Southeast Asian international relations. Thus, policymakers must navigate through the challenges of identity-based conflicts by promoting understanding, inclusiveness, and respect for diversity.

Responses to Identity Politics in Southeast Asia

Identity politics has been a significant aspect of Southeast Asian societies. Southeast Asian countries have responded differently to identity politics, and identity-based conflicts have plagued some, while others have been more successful in managing diversity and promoting pluralism. One strategy implemented in Southeast Asia as a reaction to identity politics is the adoption of an assimilationist or homogenous nationalist policy. The most important consideration is given to the main cultural or ethnic group in the country, while members of other groups are expected to assimilate into the dominant culture (Fish et al., 2021; Kolig et al., 2009; Lluch, 2019; Malešević, 2006; Prasad K., 2016). For example, in Myanmar, the military junta has pursued a policy of Burmanisation, suppressing the languages, culture, and political aspirations of ethnic minorities. However, this approach has often led to the marginalisation and exclusion of minority groups, fuelling resentment and conflict. Adopting a policy of assimilation or homogeneous nationalism in the region is a response to the issue of identity politics within the region (Kolig et al., 2009; Malešević, 2006). Identity politics refers to the political and social movements that focus on the concerns and interests of specific identity groups, such as ethnic or cultural groups, gender, or sexual orientation.

In Southeast Asia, the presence of multiple ethnic and cultural groups within a country's borders has created challenges in defining national identity and resolving conflicts that arise from these differences. Policies such as assimilation or homogeneous nationalism address these challenges by prioritising the dominant ethnic or cultural group and suppressing minority groups' language, culture, and political aspirations (Malešević, 2006; Reid, 2009). The justification for these policies is often based on the belief that a cohesive and homogeneous society is necessary for the country's stability and progress. However, this approach often leads to the marginalisation and exclusion of minority groups and fuels resentment and conflict. In Myanmar, for instance, the military junta's Burmanisation policy has resulted in ongoing conflicts between the Burman-dominated government and ethnic minority groups seeking greater autonomy and recognition. Therefore, while assimilation or homogeneous nationalism may temporarily solve the challenges of identity politics in Southeast Asia, they are likely to have negative long-term consequences, including suppressing minority groups' identities and exacerbating conflicts within the country.

Another response has been to embrace multiculturalism, recognising that diversity is a crucial aspect of national identity and promoting policies that accommodate various groups' cultural and linguistic differences. Malaysia is an excellent example of this approach, where ethnic and religious diversity is celebrated. Policies such as affirmative action for Malay Muslims and indigenous groups have been implemented to address historical discrimination. However, this approach can also lead to challenges, such as accusations of reverse discrimination and inequality based on group identity. Embracing

multiculturalism refers to accepting and celebrating diversity within a society (Kong, 2007; Moran, 2018; Vecchi et al., 2021). A multicultural approach recognises that every individual brings a unique set of values, beliefs, customs, and languages that contribute to the overall identity of the nation. This approach acknowledges that multicultural societies are formed due to historical, social, and economic factors that have attracted people from different parts of the world to form a new community. For example, the multicultural approach has been adopted in Malaysia to promote social harmony and address the challenges associated with a diverse society. The country comprises various ethnic and religious groups, including Malay Muslims, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups. Policies such as affirmative action for Malays and indigenous groups have addressed historical discrimination and narrowed the socio-economic gap between ethnic communities. While the multicultural approach has successfully promoted social integration and harmony, it has challenges. Some critics argue that affirmative action policies can reverse discrimination and create inequality based on group identity. For example, non-Malay Malaysians may feel they must be included in opportunities reserved for their Malay counterparts. It can cause resentment and division within society, affecting the overall goal of fostering social harmony. Thus, embracing multiculturalism is a positive approach to acknowledging and celebrating diversity. It provides a framework to address the challenges arising from social, economic, and historical factors contributing to a diverse population. However, it is essential to implement policies that ensure equal opportunities for all members of society and to avoid policies that may create resentment and division based on group identity.

Southeast Asian states have also attempted to manage identity politics through constitutional provisions and legal frameworks. For example, Indonesia and the Philippines have recognised minority rights and protected them through legal frameworks. However, the effectiveness of such approaches depends on the legal system's strength and the political will to implement the provisions. Southeast Asian countries have long faced challenges related to identity politics, where the interests of different ethnic, linguistic, religious, or regional communities often clash, leading to social, political, and sometimes violent conflicts. To address these issues, many regional states have tried to create constitutional provisions and legal frameworks that aim to recognise and protect minority rights and promote multiculturalism and tolerance. For example, Indonesia's constitution guarantees equal rights and complete protection to all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender. The country also has laws that forbid discrimination and hate speech and promote diversity and pluralism. In a similar vein, the constitution of the Philippines recognises and guarantees the rights of ethnic and cultural groups to maintain and advance their distinctive customs, languages, and historical practices.

Nevertheless, while such legal protections may seem promising, their effectiveness depends on various factors, such as the strength and independence of the judiciary, the commitment of government officials to enforce the laws, and the level of civil society engagement and empowerment. These factors have often been weak or lacking in Southeast Asian countries. For instance, despite the legal protections in Indonesia, ethnic and religious tensions have remained high in some regions, such as Aceh, Papua, and West Kalimantan, where the non-Muslim population feels marginalised and discriminated against by the majority Islamic community. Moreover, some laws that purportedly protect religious freedom, such as the blasphemy law, have been used to persecute minorities and restrict free speech. Similarly, in the Philippines, the implementation of minority rights has been hampered by corruption, political violence, and a lack of resources and infrastructure. Some groups, such as the Moro people in Mindanao, have demanded greater autonomy and self-determination despite constitutional guarantees, citing historical injustices and ongoing discrimination.

Therefore, while constitutional provisions and legal frameworks can provide a basis for promoting pluralism and tolerance, they must be complemented by other measures, such as educational programs, cultural exchanges, and inclusive political participation. Only with a comprehensive and sustained effort can Southeast Asian countries fully address their identity politics and ensure a fair and peaceful society for all. Crucially, civil society organisations have also played a significant role in promoting pluralism and combating identity-based conflicts. Groups such as human rights organisations, religious groups, and cultural associations have worked towards promoting inter-ethnic and religious harmony and advocating for the rights of marginalised groups.

Thus, identity politics has played an important part in the formation of Southeast Asian societies, and the countries that make up this region have adopted various approaches to dealing with the difficulties of diversity. While some have pursued assimilationist policies, others have embraced multiculturalism, recognised minority rights, and worked towards promoting pluralism. Managing diversity in Southeast Asia requires a combination of legal frameworks, political will, and civil society engagement to ensure diverse groups' peaceful and productive coexistence.

Conclusion

Identity politics in Southeast Asia is a multifaceted and ever-evolving phenomenon deeply rooted in the region's history, culture, and political systems. The concept of identity encompasses many factors, such as ethnicity, religion, language, gender, and sexuality, which shape how people perceive themselves and interact with others. In this study, identity politics in Southeast Asia has positive and negative implications. On the one hand, it provides a means for marginalised groups to assert their rights and demand more excellent representation in political, economic, and social systems. On the other hand, it can lead to conflict and division if not appropriately managed.

Future directions of identity politics in Southeast Asia will depend on various factors, such as changing demographics, global trends, and domestic political developments. There is a need to balance promoting identity-based interests with maintaining national cohesion and stability.

As elaborated above, identity politics is mainly seen as political movements based on individuals' or groups' shared characteristics or identities. These identities can be based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, or sexual orientation. In Southeast Asia, identity politics has been a prominent feature of the political landscape for several decades. Identity politics has become more prominent in Southeast Asia due to the region's changing demographics. The rise of migration and mobility has resulted in increased diversity and the emergence of new identities. As a result, there has been a growing demand for recognition of these identities by governments and society.

The influence of global trends has also affected the path that identity politics would take in Southeast Asia in the years to come. The global rise of populism and nationalism has resulted in the politicisation of identities, which has led to many groups demanding greater representation and rights. New political parties and movements founded on identity-based interests have emerged as a direct result of the issues that resulted from their emergence.

Domestic political developments in Southeast Asia have also contributed to the rise of identity politics. In many countries, ethnic and religious tensions have resulted in the growth of identity-based movements, often focused on securing more significant rights and autonomy for marginalised communities. This matter has led to conflicts, tensions, and sometimes even violence. At the same time, there is a need to balance promoting identity-based interests with maintaining national cohesion and stability. Southeast Asian governments need to address the demands of identity-based movements to uphold the

larger goal of national unity. It requires dialogue, transparency, and compromise on all sides.

Then, the path that identity politics in Southeast Asia will take in the future will be determined by a convoluted confluence of circumstances. As the state of the region continues to evolve and change, it will be necessary to strike a balance between the interests of various groups and the overarching goal of maintaining national unity and stability. The area will only be able to negotiate this complicated terrain and discover a way toward a more inclusive and equitable society if they engage in open and honest talks. Moving forward, Southeast Asian authorities need to embrace an approach that is more inclusive, one that acknowledges and respects the varied identities of the region's peoples without compromising the integrity of the nation as a whole. They also have a responsibility to address the fundamental issues that underlie marginalisation and discrimination, which are frequently the motivating factors for identity-based movements. It requires tackling issues such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion to succeed. In addition, there is an imperative to encourage conversation and participation among people of varying identities to cultivate a deeper level of mutual understanding and cooperation. Governments, organisations in civil society, and the commercial sector have a significant part to play in this issue. They can do this by establishing forums for discussion, supporting community initiatives, and promoting education and awareness-raising efforts.

Finally, while identity politics in Southeast Asia poses challenges and risks, it also offers opportunities for the region to build a more inclusive and equitable society. By adopting a balanced and proactive approach, governments, policymakers, the ASEAN body, civil society organisations, and all people can harness the potential of identity politics to strengthen national cohesion and promote sustainable development.

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