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I have been interested in cultural diversity and its political accommodation for almost twenty years. In the late 1980s, I began to conduct research in Indonesia, a vast country with over fifty major ethnic groups, a large number of smaller ones, and over three hundred different languages (most of them in the relatively unpopulated province of Papua). As the largest Muslim country, yet with significantly large religious minorities, Indonesia represents one of the most diverse countries in the world.

At first, during the course of research for my Ph.D. dissertation, I was drawn to understand how the state maintained control over such a complex country. The country was ruled by a strong, authoritarian regime whose leaders argued that their strong hand was the only means of maintaining order. In particular, they were concerned that ethnic and religious divisions, if unchecked, would lead to the disintegration of the country. They devised, therefore, a pyramidal system of rule; it included a national ideology to inculcate a sense of united and indivisible nation, and a uniform bureaucratic and institutional structure to homogenize the various parts of the archipelago. I began by studying, comparatively, how the state managed to penetrate local communities in an attempt to transform their social, political and economic lives. In a comparative study of Java and Ambon, it was apparent that the Indonesian state indeed carried some powerful means of implementing homogenous structures, devising incentives and repressive means of carrying out policies in the social and economic realm in an attempt to obtain compliance. It projected the image of a state firmly promoting modernization and economic development, and in which national unity was increasingly strong. However, this appearance of stability disguised a much more uneven pattern of response to the state. Compliance or resistance at the local level depended on a much more complex mix of local authority structures, religious authority and ethnic affiliation. In Ambon, for instance, the involvement of Muslim or Christian leadership was often crucial. Moreover, suspicion of the state among all Ambonese was much higher than among the Javanese who are the largest group in Indonesia and who tend to occupy most positions in the state. Despite twenty years of homogenizing efforts the state, therefore, had merely succeeded in obtaining superficial loyalty to its model of a strong, united Indonesian nation.

Only a few years later, in the mid-1990s, signs were already rising of a disturbing erosion of ethnic and religious tolerance. In Ambon, Christian minorities were grumbling at signs that the state was shedding its adherence to its former nationalist ideology and increasingly favouring a Muslim constituency. Small communal riots were beginning to appear in several quarters of the country. An “end of regime” atmosphere suggested that, with the ageing authoritarian leader Suharto bound to step down at some point in the near future, established political institutions could crumble and, with that, relative ethnic and religious harmony. It was this evolving context, alongside general concerns about rapidly increasing tensions, that triggered my interest in writing more directly about ethnic and religious conflict in Indonesia. At first a relatively subdued project about rising ethnic and religious tensions in remote areas of the country, it became an explanation of the explosion of large-scale communal violence and re-escalation of older conflicts in the midst of the unravelling of the authoritarian regime. My book, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), and other publications, provided the first comparative explanation for this wave of ethnic and religious violence.

I was particularly interested, in that book, in understanding why conflicts are often clustered in particular time periods. Although there were clearly local factors that explained rising tensions in some areas, but not in others, factors that also explained why various conflicts differed in form as well as in their



cause, it was puzzling that they would escalate or re-escalate all at once: from secessionist conflict in East Timor and Aceh; to Dayaks and Madurese violence in Kalimantan; and Muslim/Christian warfare in Ambon. It was too simple to explain this outcome by the removal of authoritarian repression over old, smouldering hatreds. Indeed, many of these conflicts were new and, furthermore, when looking back at Indonesia's history, it became apparent that particular time periods were more prone to ethnic and religious conflict than others. Parallel processes drove individual conflicts but they were conditioned, in large part, by the macro-institutional changes occurring at the national level. The evolution of national institutions marked not only periods of lesser repressive instruments but also different means of accommodating ethnic and religious differences within these structures. Moreover, the form of this accommodation was defined and limited by what I have called a "national model" (the principles of inclusion and exclusion, and their terms, for various ethnic and religious groups). Such models can vary from multiculturalist ones, such as in Canada, to recognition of several nations within one state or, as in the case of Indonesia, a single unified nation. The way in which state leaders, particularly under the authoritarian regime of President Suharto, came to define a single, unified Indonesian nation created marginalized and excluded groups in various periods of institutionalization of this model. As a result, tensions would arise in response to the inclusion/exclusion, or terms of inclusion, that defined majority or minority groups, gave them representation, or excluded them altogether.

As a general reflection on ethnic accommodation and its relationship to various forms of nationalism, the book emphasizes the implications of defining particular forms of national models and corresponding institutions. It points to the importance of studying, historically, various critical junctures when institutional change prompts insecurities among ethnic groups, and creates conditions for renegotiating terms of inclusion or, more fundamentally, a new national model. These moments, even in otherwise more stable institutional histories, tend to create conditions for periods of heightened ethnic and religious conflict.

From national models to implications of democracy for the protection of ethnic minorities

Since publishing *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*, I have been investigating the effects of democratization on the status of ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia. This project is a broad, comparative analysis of the ways in which states in Southeast Asia have accommodated various types of ethnic minorities: relatively large, secessionist groups; small, indigenous and often geographically remote communities; and "migrant" groups. To date, there are no systematic attempts to compare the treatment of various minorities, how they have been represented and their interests served in the various states of Southeast Asia. Under a period of democratic transition in three of these states — the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia — this question becomes very important for understanding the quality of democracy in these countries.

The project is also linked to my previous reflection on national models since the idea of strong, unitary nations continues to define most states in the region. In addition to Indonesia, Thailand has probably gone furthest in identifying a "Thai" nation, specifying its attributes, and forcing assimilation to this mould. The Philippines has espoused more implicitly a single nation, in the form of a Christianized Filipino identity. In spite of having the largest minority in Southeast Asia — the Chinese being 30% of the country's population — Malaysia's political elite has continued to push for an increasingly Malay and Muslim character of the Malaysian nation. And Burma/Myanmar, probably one of the most major failures of ethnic accommodation in modern Southeast Asia, continues to struggle with the definition of a national model that might, in the future, allow for the inclusion of ethnic minorities when, and if, it democratizes. The overwhelmingly Burman definition of the nation has been implemented through successive authoritarian regimes since the ethnic instability and failed attempts at accommodation during a few years of democratic rule in the 1950s. As such, the relationship between democracy and ethnic accommodation in Southeast Asia has been one of immense obstacles.

For countries that have recently democratized, have ethnic minorities seen their status improve? Have they increased their representation in the countries' institutions? Have they been better able to pursue their collective interests by using established political institutions? These questions drive the



analysis for the project, which will lead to the publication of a book and several articles/book chapters. As part of this investigation, the question becomes whether democracy is always best able to serve the interests of ethnic minorities. Ironically, in some circumstances, a relatively narrow definition of a national model might lead to the establishment of democratic representation that ignores groups altogether, thereby sometimes failing to replace channels of communication and representation that were sometimes present, more informally, under authoritarian rule. These kinds of gains and losses can render democratic institutions unstable and would probably need to be revised for greater accommodation of group interests. Such questions guide the probing of the Southeast Asian region, which is complex, given the diversity of types of ethnic groups.