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“Nationalism that violates the dignity of human beings deserves condemnation”

An interview with Bonn Juego by Ella Soesanto and Fabian Heppe

Globally, strong political leaders are increasingly controlling governments – that is also the case in many Asian countries. But what makes them successful in mobilizing the masses and making people believe in their populist visions?

Donald Trump or Rodrigo Duterte, Victor Orban or Hun Sen. As in the Western hemisphere, populist politicians with a nationalistic agenda are on the rise in Asia. How do you explain their popularity?

From a general viewpoint, the relative popularity of right-wing populist politicians and nationalist movements arises from the protracted crises of liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism across the world. We are at a historical moment when the ideological hegemony of American-European liberalism is being challenged by various interest groups, particularly from both the political right and the political left at the same time. Asia's present and future are engaged in these conflict-ridden processes of change. The emerging version of nationalistic ideologies in parts of Asia today can be construed both as a symptom of, and a response to, these crises.

What do the Asian responses look like and do they have common characteristics?

It is important to recognize Asia's diversity and evolution to avoid the mistake of making sweeping and hasty generalizations about social processes. The resurgence of nationalism in different parts of Asia must be understood in terms of their respective historical contexts. The idea of nationalism consistently informs the conduct of economic strategy and international relations of the Communist Party of China. President Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream, notably the Belt and Road Initiative, is a foreign policy pursued with a view to China's domestic economic development and its project for national revival. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte effectively used the rhetoric of nationalism in his presidential campaign; but now that he is in power, his administration's external affairs hardly embody an independent foreign policy. In the case of Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist bloc in India, the discourses of nationalism are largely shaped by dominant political, ethnic and caste interests in the spheres of society and culture and by capitalist class dynamics in economic relations. Nationalistic movements in Asia have reemerged from different narratives – ranging from ethno-religious ideologies in India and Myanmar, to historical revisionism in Japan and racial purity in the Koreas. Yet the activities of these reactionary social forces are not contributing to the betterment of human conditions and relations.

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But Asian history has shown that nationalism can be a positive force of change. The decolonization movements in India in the 1940s were largely driven by nationalistic ideas such as self-sovereignty. What is different this time?

The idea of nationalism can be healthy if it is merely used as an ideological tool toward a broader liberating objective, and not as a political goal itself. The nationalism ideology in Mahatma Gandhi’s independence movement is not the same as the extreme nationalist, racist and nativist agenda of far-right groups. Historically, third-world nationalism in different countries in Asia was progressive, for it was a resistance movement pursued in the spirit of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. It was inspired by an anti-colonial national consciousness, rather than by the viciousness of racial aggrandizement. It was focused on the collective aspirations of the people for liberation, rather than on an abstract devotion to a nation. It was based on unifying diverse peoples and multiple classes against the power of imperialist oppressors, rather than on annihilating cultural diversity by one ethnic, religious or racial group. It was also a legitimate articulation for historical justice and truth-seeking, rather than a deceitful project of historical revisionism and lies.

So to a certain degree nationalism was necessary in the struggle for independence from foreign occupiers. How did this period of decolonization lead to the nationalism that we can find in Asia today?

Asia’s decolonization process is far from complete. This is partly because Eurocentrism has not been uprooted in Western ideology and praxis. The concepts of “The White Man’s Burden” and “Civilizing Mission” persist – that is, the conviction that Europe and the United States are the models of, and must lead the world toward, modernity, progress and enlightenment. Importantly, the so-called decolonization process also led to a certain form of “new colonialism” as the Asian countries became fully integrated into the global production system and international division of labor, serving as peripheral nation-states to core capitalist centers. The real inequalities created by this new form of colonialism under conditions of neoliberal globalization greatly contributed to the popularity of nationalist parties and their rhetoric, notwithstanding their shallow and backward sense of nationalism.

Only right-wing politicians seem to profit from the current crises. Why are populists in Asia so successful in mobilizing the masses, in contrast to the liberal left?

During this conjunctural crisis, no ideological camp can already claim victory. A new balance of social forces is competing for hegemony. The liberal elites are persistent in their efforts to conserve their somewhat dominant position. Sections of the political left are also constructing their alternative programs. But, indeed, Asia’s right-wing populist politicians have exhibited more advantages in catching the zeitgeist. Firstly, the discursive framing in populism is done by echoing both the most basic day-to-day issues (such as inefficient public services and street crime) and the most fundamental social problems (such as colonial history, oligarchical corruption and class inequalities). This populist message resonates well with people’s lived experiences and their legitimate fears, insecurities, resentments, hopes and anxieties. Right-wing populists construct a language – including images for social media propaganda – that has high impact appeal on emotions. Ironically, the anti-elite and anti-establishment slogans are essentially leftist discourses that have been appropriated by the political right. Secondly, the historical contradictions within the liberal-democratic order are being revealed, especially for countries that have undergone social uprisings or a period of

transition from authoritarianism, such as Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. The problem with “liberal” uprisings is not only about their short-lived and futile deprivation of the civil liberties of the deposed autocrats, but more crucially about their failure to reclaim and redistribute the state assets stolen by despots, their families and business cronies. The democratization processes in Asia focused much on promoting the ideals of political liberty, without simultaneously realizing the goals of socio-economic equality and human solidarity. Thirdly, mass mobilizations of the right in present-day Asia are distinctly organized around charismatic leaders, or a personality cult, from Cambodia’s Hun Sen and the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte to India’s Narendra Modi and Pakistan’s Imran Khan. A leader’s charisma is a compelling source of power and authority in Asian societies. At the moment, there are hardly any charismatic personalities or figureheads who could muster and command a faithful following among Asia’s political left and liberals.

All of these leaders that you mention are men who have publicly displayed macho and misogynist behavior. Pakistani President Imran Khan said that feminism degraded the role of motherhood while President Duterte is applauded for his rape jokes. How are nationalism and sexism interlinked in Asia?

Some right nationalist groups are connected to conservative politics. The conservative vision for nation-building is the renewal of cultural traditions – including the social system of patriarchy, which preserves masculine privilege by subordinating or repressing women and other sexual minorities. The exclusivist strain of nationalism protects the belief in the uniformity of its women citizens through politics of homogenization by differentiating its own race from others. Nevertheless, the normalization of macho, misogynist, and homophobic language of populist leaders and their supporters has the effect of creating a climate that legitimizes physical violence against girls, women and sexual minorities.

Yet Duterte’s outrageous, misogynistic and homophobic comments did not have a substantial negative impact on his popularity ratings. Sections of women and the LGBTQ community are among Duterte’s passionate and loyal supporters, even defending his macho remarks and behavior toward women.

A distinctive characteristic of populism is its capacity for catch-all politics and cross-class alliances which, in turn, have a divide-and-rule effect among possible opposition groups. Populist politicians – and nationalist right movements – can play identity politics to their advantage. They choose to be unconstrained by the norms of political correctness, and this enables them to publicly express popular beliefs and opinions, such as machismo and sexism, that are held deep in the psyche of many people. Hence, there are significant limitations on the liberal approach in using identity politics as critique against right-wing populism. The game of identity politics being played by both the populist right and the liberal elites is at best a distraction from the fundamental point of social conflict, and at worst a cause of the divide-and-conquer of possible solidarity of the oppressed multitude. Pursuing identity politics against the sexism and racism of the populist and nationalist right is an important tactical step toward the formation of broad, organized resistance against an oppressive socio-economic system. But opposition against right-wing nationalism and populism should be focused on political orientation and class interests, rather than on gender identity issues. Understanding the connections and underlying causes of all forms of oppression and exploitation based on class, race, gender and sexual orientation is the order of the day to transcend the drawbacks of identity politics and to oppose regressive populism.

Another field, next to gender politics, where divide-and-conquer tactics are used is in the realm of refugee policies. In Europe, the so-called refugee crisis is fueling nationalistic debates and giving more legitimacy to anti-liberal forces. From an Asian perspective, what do you think about the debates on refugee and immigration policy in Europe?

In Europe, the recent popularity of right-wing, anti-immigrant parties is strongly linked to the immigration and refugee crises. However, Western debates between the nationalist right, liberals, and even the political left, overlook the fact that the refugees from Africa and the Middle East are victims of US and EU foreign policies and invasions of their communities – thus, they are fleeing underdevelopment and war conditions. The discourses on democracy and favoring immigration that the liberals and some sections of the left have adopted to address the refugee crisis are creating even more problems. While the liberal and leftist discourse on the refugee question is more humane than the rightist punitive policies of closing borders, expulsion or criminalization, such discursive focus plays into the hands of the right and ultra-nationalist political forces. Instead, what must be highlighted in the public dialogue is that wars of conquest and maldevelopment are the fundamental causes of the refugee crises and mass immigration. Campaigns seeking to end imperialist wars, reparations for crimes against humanity in accordance with international law, and long-term funds for the reconstruction of the productive sectors of the developing economies might be potent alternatives to the populist right’s discourse on extreme nationalism.

Does the question of refugees also play a role in Asian nationalistic developments?

In Asia, several refugee and immigration problems are rooted in internal displacements due to conflicts, poverty, environmental disaster and political persecution. Others can be traced back to the colonial legacy of displacing ethnic communities, such as the case of Rohingya refugees in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Therefore, for both the European and Asian experiences, the explanation of the political consequences of the refugee and immigration crises cannot be reduced to the abstract concept of nationalism. Underpinning the nationalist ideology are different and overlapping political, ethnic, religious, business and economic interests. Oftentimes, it is interest rather than ideology that determines the motivation of stakeholders and politically conscious actors. When looking into the behavior of the political right toward refugees and immigrants, more attention should be paid to the diseases of Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism and discrimination, rather than to abstract nationalism.

However, in Myanmar the ongoing humanitarian crisis of nearly a million minority Rohingya Muslim refugees in the Rakhine state has amplified nationalistic responses.

Since the 1960s, Myanmar’s ruling elites have governed their ethnically diverse society through the project of “Burmanization,” which is a policy – and arguably a violent strategy – to assimilate ethnic minorities into the majority’s culture (Burman), religion (Buddhism), and language (Burmese). Burmanization has long been the basis of Myanmar’s process of building its nation-state, and it continues to be embedded in the supposed democratization of Myanmar under State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. The government and military of Myanmar enjoys popular support from the local population regarding their treatment of the stateless Rohingyas. This is suggestive of the enduring influence of Burmese nationalists on defining the nation-state of Myanmar, and of the ethnicized nature of current democratization efforts in the country. But oftentimes, the nationalist ideology ends when actual political, economic and social interests begin.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her fellow state functionaries are apparently not nationalists when it comes to the neoliberalization of Myanmar’s economy and natural environment. Buddhist nationalists campaign for the denial of Myanmar citizenship to the Rohingya Muslims because of their ethnic and religious interest in Burmanization. China and India support the Myanmar leadership and military on the Rohingya issue chiefly because of their investment, commercial, and security interests in the Rakhine state.

While nationalism in Asia particularly emphasizes state sovereignty and ethnicity, the current international order is based on the belief that all people are equal and human rights apply universally. Do nationalistic ideas undermine the idea of human rights?

Nationalistic ideas are not necessarily contradictory to the ideals of state sovereignty and human rights. The morality of the nationalist ideology depends on its intent and consequences in particular circumstances. Ho Chi Minh’s nationalist struggle for the independence and liberation of Vietnam was markedly different from the genocidal nationalism of Pol Pot in Cambodia. Nationalism in defense of state sovereignty and the right of people to self-determination is morally justified. But nationalism used as an excuse to violate the inherent rights and dignity of human beings deserves condemnation. World history is replete with tragic events showcasing how the name of human rights is used by imperial powers to destroy sovereign states, and how the principle of state sovereignty is abused to shield gross violations of human rights.

In 1999–2000, the UN-led INTERFET (International Force East Timor), a multinational peacekeeping force, intervened to stop the genocide of Timorese by the Indonesian government’s militias. This was a positive example of the protection of the universal principle of human rights in Southeast Asia. How binding are human rights in Asia today?

Interestingly, the “Asian Values” discourse has emerged as a major critique of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Its most vocal proponents have been Asia’s authoritarian leaders – from the late Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia in the 1990s to Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines recently. By arguing that the implementation of rights must be country-specific, they are basically attacking the foundational characteristics of the UDHR – that human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible and interdependent. While they have valid criticisms about the double standards of the United States and Europe on the practice of human rights, these do not justify any actions to renege on their obligations to human rights. Several Asian states had actively participated in the formulation of the UDHR. In fact, the UDHR had served as an initial guiding framework for many Asian countries in their decolonization, state formation, and nation-building processes. ■■■