

The Politics of **Multiculturalism**

*Pluralism and Citizenship
in Malaysia, Singapore,
and Indonesia*



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Edited by Robert W. Hefner

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and Indonesia*

EDITED BY
ROBERT W. HEFNER

PUS. ANA PERDANA



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Acknowledgments

THE CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS BOOK WERE PART OF A TWO-YEAR research and training project that I organized with the support of the Ford Foundation from 1998 to 2000. Entitled “Southeast Asian Pluralisms: Social Resources for Civility and Participation in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia,” the project was a joint collaboration between Ford and the Program on Civil Society and Civic Culture at the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture (ISEC) at Boston University. The project had several distinct aims, but its most important was to encourage Malaysian, Singaporean, and Indonesian public intellectuals to reflect on the challenge of ethnic, religious, and gender pluralism for citizenship in their respective societies. I met with researchers in small groups and individually during 1998. Those carrying out fieldwork then did so in late 1998 and the first half of 1999. Most but not all of the researchers then came together in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, during the first week of August 1999 to discuss the preliminary results of their research at a conference jointly sponsored by Ford, ISEC, and the Institute for Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS) of the Universiti Kebangsaan. All of the participants continued to exchange materials and ideas through mid-2000; this book is the fruit of those discussions. Some among the researchers also continued carrying out interviews, and several plan additional publications in months to come.

I want to thank colleagues at the Ford Foundation Jakarta for their generous support of this project at a time when domestic troubles across the region were giving special urgency to the problem of pluralism and citizenship. At Ford, I want to extend special thanks to Dr. Mary Zurbuchen, director of the Jakarta office at the time of the project, for her unfailing friendship, support, and inspiration. I also want to thank Dr. Hans Antlov, whose parallel projects as director of the Jakarta office’s program on civil society complemented this project in vital ways. At ISEC I want to extend my special thanks to the director, Dr. Peter L. Berger, for his generous encouragement for this and other projects on citizenship and civil society in East-Southeast Asia.

Building on related research I had been conducting during summer visits each year since 1991, I made several long visits to Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia for the project during 1998 and 2000. I also lived in and carried out research in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and the Klang Valley, Malaysia, for all of 1999. My own interviews (some three hundred total) and ethnographic research were designed to complement research done by the local research teams. I want to extend my great thanks to Dr. Stuart Plattner and the anthropology program at the National Science Foundation for its generous support of my research. Some conclusions from the NSF portion of the research are apparent in the introduction to this book, but I plan to engage my own Malaysian and Indonesian materials more systematically in separate publications.

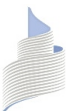
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Finally, I must again thank all of the contributors to this volume, as well as the research staffs that supported them. The years 1998–2000 were a period of political and economic trial in the Southeast Asia region, and it was not an easy time for many of us to be doing academic research. For their effort and generosity, I thank all who were involved in the research.

ROBERT HEFNER
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The Politics of Multiculturalism





1

Introduction

Multiculturalism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia

Robert W. Hefner

FEW CHALLENGES TO THE MODERN DREAM OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP appear more daunting than the presence of severe ethnic, religious, and linguistic divisions in society. From early on in the modern era, Western liberal theorists were pessimistic about the prospects for democratic governance in deeply plural countries. In the nineteenth century, no less colossal a figure than J. S. Mill wrote that “Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist” (Mill 1958, 230). There is an irony here. Nineteenth-century liberals like Mill were eager to accommodate the plurality of utilitarian interests among buyers and sellers in the marketplace. When it came to public life and politics, however, these same liberals “were strikingly unready for a plurality of cultures” (Walzer 1996, 53).

In the years that followed the First World War, a few Western thinkers expressed confidence that democracy might yet be possible in multicultural societies. Ratified after the Great War, the charter for the League of Nations seemed a breakthrough in this regard, balancing the rights of cultural majorities with those of minorities. The racial and ethnic horrors of World War II, however, led to widespread disillusionment with formulas like these that acknowledged communal identities. Individually based rights came to be viewed as the only acceptable form of human rights, and the central issue toward which democratic protections should be oriented.

“Where these individual rights are firmly protected, liberals assumed, no further rights needed to be attributed to the members of specific ethnic or national minorities” (Kymlicka 1995, 2–3).

The years following the Second World War also saw a revival of the old pessimism concerning the prospects for democracy in deeply plural societies. The new consensus was canonized in the “modernization theory” that dominated Western political thought in the 1950s and 1960s. A key premise of the theory was that democracy is impossible without modernization, and modernization requires the homogenization of political culture. Where this ideological homogeneity is wanting, the state must take the lead in inculcating a common culture among its diverse citizenry. The influential Harvard political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington, put the matter none too subtly when he declared that national integration requires “the replacement of a large number of traditional, religious, familial, and ethnic political authorities by a single, secular, national political authority” (Huntington 1968, 34). Without the state-promoted pruning of ethnoreligious solidarities, it seemed, democracy and civil peace are in peril.¹

For many observers, the difficulties democratic institutions encountered in some of the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa in the 1960s seemed to confirm this pessimism. As a result of these and other developments, then, the problem of cultural pluralism faded from discussion in mainstream political theory, except for its occasional citation as an obstacle to democratic progress. Global developments since the early 1990s, however, have made it impossible to continue treating the issue in so offhanded a manner. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe raised new hopes for the spread of liberal democracy to former communist countries. As painfully illustrated in the Balkans and Caucasus, however, most of the ex-communist countries were deeply plural, and the collapse was sometimes followed, not by a democratic peace, but by fierce ethnoreligious rivalries for control of the state. Unless we were to give up on the dream of democratization in these countries entirely, there seemed no way around the fact that policy makers and theorists had to come to terms again with the problem of pluralism and democracy.

Another development forcing the problem of pluralism back into democratic discussion in the 1990s and 2000s was a vast increase in immigration to Western countries. In the United States, the immigration was the largest seen since the Great Immigration of the 1890s; in Europe, the immigration was so massive as to be without modern precedent. Not insignificantly, the arriving population included a far greater number of non-Europeans than had historically figured in these countries’ immigrant pool. In addition, the immigration took place at a time of ethnic revival

in the advanced industrial societies and ethnoreligious resurgence in much of the developing world.² In Western Europe, the changing cultural and racial complexion of the immigration helped to revive the fortunes of the extreme right, which used attacks on immigrants and supporters of multicultural citizenship as a rallying cry (Modood 1997). The immigration forced more moderate, mainstream citizens to recognize that, if they ever *had*, they no longer lived in pristine nation-states huddled around a common ethnonationalist hearth. European nations, too, were becoming deeply plural, with ethnoreligious subcultures distinct from those hallowed in nationalist mythologies.

The United States, Canada, and Australia have always had a different policy on immigrants and national culture than the countries of continental Europe, a pattern that has come to be known in political literature as the “Anglo-American” or “Anglo conformist” model (Almond 1956; Lijphart 1977; Kymlicka 1995, 14). These were settler societies that had not hesitated to displace native inhabitants from their homelands. Consistent with the settler project, these countries were more willing than their continental counterparts to welcome foreign immigrants—as long as the newcomers were willing and able to assimilate to mainstream linguistic, cultural, and racial prototypes. However, the scale of immigration in the 1980s and 1990s changed the terms of the Anglo-American contract once and for all. The immigration made it easier for minorities, old and new, to resist mainstream demands for assimilation and assert their identities more boldly. As in Western Europe, minority boldness ignited the passions of the extreme right, and prompted even mainstream citizens to wonder about the possibilities of civic collaboration across deep cultural divides.

For these and other reasons, in recent years we have seen renewed interest in the problem of democracy and cultural pluralism or, to borrow a more precise phrase from Will Kymlicka (1995), “multicultural citizenship.” Unfortunately, however, most writers on the topic still take Western industrialized societies as the privileged point of entry to their discussion. In an era of galloping globalization, however, when not just some, but most countries are comprised of culturally diverse populations, it is helpful to remember that non-Western societies have their own history of pluralist challenge and their own need to devise meaningful formulas for its resolution. Of course, if, in the best tradition of normative political philosophy, we are merely concerned with determining “the extent to which society meets norms of justice, individual freedom and deliberative democracy” (Kymlicka and Norman 2000, 15), our gaze need not be decentered too far from familiar Western terrains. Although it shares much

with political philosophy, however, the sociology or anthropology of pluralism and democracy must be concerned, not merely with measuring a society's conformity to a checklist of liberal ideals, but with understanding the cultural and sociological circumstances that make different responses to the problem of pluralism and citizenship likely. What conditions facilitate peaceful coexistence and inclusive participation in multicultural societies? What conditions undermine these goals? Must the political formulas for addressing the problem of multiculturalism and citizenship be the same in all countries? Or must they vary in a manner that requires us to engage local genealogies of knowledge and power?

The question of how to achieve civility and inclusive citizenship in deeply plural societies is today a near-universal one. An understanding of the conditions that facilitate its resolution is as urgently needed in non-Western societies as well as Western ones. This knowledge can enrich the Western experience even as it deepens our understanding of the possibility of democracy across cultures. The first aim of the essays in this volume is to contribute to just such a pool of comparative knowledge.

Plural Societies, Created

Few areas of the non-Western world illustrate the legacy and challenge of cultural pluralism in a manner more striking than the Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In Western political theory during the 1930s and 1940s, the colonial predecessors to these societies, then known as British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, were regarded as the locus classicus for the newly minted concept of "plural society." In a series of widely read works prepared in the final years of Western colonialism in Southeast Asia (Furnivall 1944, 1948), the British administrator and political writer, J. S. Furnivall, introduced Western readers to the idea of plural societies, and identified the countries we today call Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore as its most striking examples.

For Furnivall, a plural society is a society that comprises "two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit" (Furnivall 1944, 446). As with Chinese, Indians, and Malays in British Malaya, this combination of geographical propinquity and social segregation, Furnivall argued, is accompanied by a caste-like division of labor, in which ethnoreligious groups play different economic roles. This social segregation in turn gives rise to what Furnivall regarded as these societies' most unsettling political trait: their lack of a "common social will."

There was a larger logic to this last argument. Like many British scholars and civil servants in his time, Furnivall was an avid student of neoclassical economics. His studies of the economies of Burma and Indonesia remain among the finest written in the late colonial period. As an observer of European colonialism, however, Furnivall was also aware that economics alone can never grasp the full logic of human behavior or social organization. He remarked, for example, that Adam Smith and later economists “took for granted the existence and efficacy of social demand.” Furnivall defined social demand as the shared tastes, values, and identities that an individual “experiences as a member of that society and can satisfy [only] as a member of that society” (Furnivall 1944, 448). For Furnivall, the Smithian assumption of cultural homogeneity is an acceptable simplification in England, “with its conservative traditions and its stable institutions,” but it overlooks a critical problem in societies like those in insular Southeast Asia: how to facilitate peaceful and cooperative interaction in a society whose denizens have no sense of themselves as a people or culture. In settings like these, Furnivall believed, the ethnic and religious “sections” making up society are so different from one another that they have little in common than their market exchange.

The reason this is troubling, Furnivall argued (in a manner that echoed the great French sociologist, Émile Durkheim), is that the market and “interests” are fickle guarantees of civil peace. In countries whose inhabitants hold common values, “fellow-feelings” based on mutuality and shared identity help to guide citizens through the thicket of daily life, in a manner that keeps the pursuit of market interests in acceptable ethical bounds. In such felicitous circumstances, the division of labor that Adam Smith celebrated as the genius of the market does not obliterate the common will or create a war of each against all, but allows the pursuit of private welfare within a “standpoint of common citizenship” (1944, 451). The situation in a plural society, by contrast, offers no such softening of the all-too-visible hand of marketplace competition:

[T]he community tends to be organized for production rather than for social life; social demand is sectionalized, and within each section of the community the social demand becomes disorganized and ineffective, so that in each section the members are debarred from leading the full life of a citizen in a homogeneous community; finally, the reaction against these abnormal conditions, taking in each section the form of Nationalism, sets one community against the other so as to emphasize the plural character of the society and aggravate its instability, thereby enhancing the need for it to be held together by some force exerted from outside. (1944, 459)

Furnivall's insights into what we might today call the culturally "embedded" nature of capitalism were useful correctives to the narrowly economic understandings of markets and rationality widespread in his day (and, alas, still in ours).³ But there was an irony to Furnivall's contrast between the plural societies of Asia and the "homogeneous" societies of the West. His model made no mention of the troubling presence of racial, ethnic, religious, or gender chauvinism in Western countries. All the more ironic, it did so at a time when European civilization was being ravaged by ethnic and racial hatreds more horrifying than anything ever seen in Southeast Asia.⁴ Furnivall's model of Southeast Asian pluralisms also overlooked the way in which Europeans had imported chauvinistic customs into their colonial holdings (Gouda 1995; Stoler 1989). However strong their appetite for a liberal marketplace, European colonials showed a decidedly illiberal taste for reserving the commanding heights of politics, culture, and society for themselves.

To his credit, Furnivall criticized the racial ideologies of the European powers, describing them as "quasi-religious sanctions for the predominance of the European caste both in British India and in Netherlands India" (1944, 464). But he failed to develop this insight in a sustained manner, saying little about the ways in which at least some of the "segmentary" interaction he observed in native society was the product of deliberate European engineering. Instead of a sustained critique of colonial complicities, Furnivall fell back on a wistful paean for the passing of the colonial order. With the rise of native nationalist movements, Furnivall sensed, European colonialism's days were numbered. In his view, however, Asian nationalisms offered no solution to the problems of identity and integration in these deeply divided countries. Nationalism, he believed, would end only by pitting one ethnic community against another, exacerbating rather than ameliorating society's divisions. Unless some kind of formula for pluralist federation could be devised, Southeast Asian pluralism seemed doomed to a nightmarish "anarchy" (Furnivall 1944, 468–469).

Not long after Furnivall put his thoughts to paper, colonialism did come to an end in these three countries—in 1945 in Indonesia (formalized by a treaty with the Dutch in December 1949), in 1957 in Malaysia, and in 1959 in Singapore.⁵ Although the Europeans forfeited their role as colonial masters, independence did not quite push these countries into the abyss of anarchy Furnivall had forecast. The new native leadership proved more skilled at operating the machinery of government than Furnivall had imagined.

At least some of the concerns Furnivall had voiced, however, were confirmed in the postwar and independence era. Malaysia was swept by

fierce ethnic violence in the years following World War II and again in 1969. Chinese-dominated Singapore witnessed ethnic riots in 1964, and in 1965 was forced out of its two-year federation with Malaysia after a dispute over the rights of Malay and Chinese citizens. Indonesia saw outbreaks of communal violence in the late 1950s and 1965; more shocking yet, Indonesia was shaken by bitter ethnoreligious violence from 1996 to 2001. Less dramatic but heated debates over ethnic and religious policies have regularly disturbed the postcolonial peace in each of these countries. Faced with these troubles, each country's leaders have had to scramble to devise workable programs for citizenship and nation. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, however, the formulas devised in each country have varied, in a way that reflects colonial histories, postcolonial legacies, and, most tellingly, contemporary contests among rival groupings in state and society.

What makes these countries' experience all the more intriguing is that, despite their political problems, from the late 1960s to the beginning of the East Asian economic crisis in August 1997, these three countries enjoyed one of the most sustained periods of economic expansion the industrializing world has ever seen (Hefner 1998a). For the better part of a generation these countries saw annual rates of GDP growth of 6 percent to 8 percent. The growth brought a new middle class into existence and allowed dramatic increases in per capita income. Today Singapore is an affluent country by any standard. Barely on par with Ethiopia in the early 1960s, Indonesia today is in the upper ranks of low-income countries (a standing imperiled, however, by continuing political instability). Malaysia lies in-between its two neighbors.

Interestingly, however, this growth has not diminished the public's preoccupation with ethnoreligious divisions, but has raised new questions concerning justice and participation. Is one ethnic or religious group disproportionately benefiting from the fruits of economic growth? Have the rules of the economic game been unfairly rigged in favor of one segment of the population? Should market processes be complemented by programs of affirmative action to assist those populations not yet enjoying their fair share of the economic pie? These questions acquired even greater urgency in late 1997 and 1998, as East and Southeast Asia descended into economic crisis. The crisis reignited debates on economic policy and social justice; in Indonesia, it gave rise to urban violence in which Chinese storekeepers became the target of mob fury.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz once remarked that national independence stimulated ethnoreligious sentiments in the new nations because it introduced "a valuable new prize," namely control of the state

(Geertz 1973a, 270). The same is true in spades of modern capitalist development. When the market works in such a manner as to distribute its benefits evenly across cultural divides, it can reinforce democratic ideals of civic harmony and citizenship. However, when market processes concentrate wealth and power in the hands of one ethnic, religious, or other cultural segment, they are just as likely to exacerbate tensions and undermine the civic accommodations on which long-term prosperity depends. Any effort to understand the new face of ethnoreligious pluralism in these three Southeast Asian societies, then, must assess the impact of market-making and nation-building on existing and emerging social divisions.

“Civil” Society Revisited

It was against this twin background, then, of renewed attention to the problem of pluralism in democratic theory, and of growing interest in the impact of two generations of nation-building and market-making on the pluralist landscape of these countries (complicated by the aftershocks of the Asian economic crisis), that the authors in this book came together in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, during the first week of August 1999. The gathering was sponsored by the Ford Foundation as part of a research and training project I directed from 1998 to 2000 on, “Southeast Asian Pluralisms: Social Resources for Civility and Participation in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia.” Although three small teams continued carrying out interviews and ethnographic work into late 2000, the August conference was the final get-together for most participants in the three-country project.

The project involved five multidisciplinary research teams (two in Indonesia, two in Malaysia, and one in Singapore), each responsible for carrying out field interviews; it also involved a smaller number of independent paper writers. With the exception of me as project director, all research participants were recruited from the three project countries.⁶ Hailing from sociology, political science, anthropology, and history, as well as a leading Muslim non-governmental organization in Indonesia, after some short training sessions the research teams set out in late 1998 and early 1999 to take the pulse of the new pluralism. They did so by conducting in-depth interviews in each country with one hundred to two hundred prominent actors in any of four social fields: religious organizations; business and labor; locally based non-governmental organizations (including the arts and media); and political organizations. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to content analysis. The independent paper writers also carried out a smaller number of interviews on their own, focused on a select segment of the pluralist population.

In examining the discourse and practice of pluralism across these four spheres, the project hoped to address a serious shortcoming in the current literature on citizenship and civic participation. As in Robert Putnam's otherwise exemplary study of civic traditions in modern Italy (Putnam 1993), that literature rightly asserts that "civil society" organizations—voluntary associations and relationships located in the public sphere between the family and the state (Hall 1995; Hefner 1998b)—can serve as a kind of "social capital" that contributes to the development of a public culture of citizenship and inclusive participation. Formal constitutions and elections are simply not enough, as Putnam cogently puts it, to "make democracy work." *Formal* democracy requires a societally based, *informal* politics of civility and participation if its institutions are to take hold.

These are important observations, consistent with the findings of the studies in this book. Much of the above-mentioned literature and much of the public activism surrounding the idea of civil society over the past ten years, however, proceeds from this sound premise to make two additional, more problematic, assumptions about the relationship of civil society to democratization. The first assumption is that civil society is a relatively homogeneous, undifferentiated thing, defined simply by the presence of self-organizing, "lateral" associations organized outside the family and apart from the state. The second assumption is that, whatever their location or purpose, civil society organizations are almost always "good" for democracy.

The problem with these assumptions is that, whether in Robert Putnam's work or in the statements of civil society activists (including many in Southeast Asia), nary a word is said about how civic associations may be cross-cut by deep ethnic, religious, or ideological divides. Unfortunately for those who place all of their democratic eggs in the civil society basket, history shows us time and time again that civic associations can be organized in a manner consistent with existing ethnoreligious divisions in society. History also shows that, rather than serving as social capital for democracy, at times these divisions can engender debilitating social rivalries that diminish rather than enhance the prospects for civic decency. To put the matter bluntly, then, civil society is not always "democracy-good." As with right-wing militias or the Klu Klux Klan in the United States, there is nothing at all unusual about certain "civil" organizations becoming, as far as citizenship and democracy are concerned, deeply "uncivil" in their behavior.

To state the matter in more sociological terms, the mere facts of structural "autonomy" and "self-organization" that theorists and activists celebrate as the essence of civil society do not in any sense guarantee that the attitudes or actions of civil society groupings will be inclusive or

Few challenges to the modern dream of democratic citizenship appear greater than the presence of severe ethnic, religious, and linguistic divisions in society. With their diverse religions and ethnic communities, the Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia have grappled with this problem since achieving independence after the Second World War. Each country has on occasion been torn by violence over the proper terms for accommodating pluralism. Until the Asian economic crisis of 1997, however, these nations also enjoyed one of the most sustained economic expansions the non-Western world has ever seen.

This timely volume brings together fifteen leading specialists of the region to consider the impact of two generations of nation-building and market-making on pluralism and citizenship in these deeply divided Asian societies. Examining the new face of pluralism from the perspective of markets, politics, gender, and religion, the studies show that each country has developed a strikingly different response to the challenges of citizenship and diversity. The contributors, most of whom come from Southeast Asia, pay particular attention to the tension between state and societal approaches to citizenship. They suggest that the achievement of an effectively participatory public sphere in these countries will depend not only on the presence of an independent "civil society," but on a synergy of state and society that nurtures a public culture capable of mediating ethnic, religious, and gender divides.



The achievement of an effectively participatory public sphere in these countries will depend not only on the presence of an independent "civil society," but on a synergy of state and society that nurtures a public culture capable of mediating ethnic, religious, and gender divides.

The Politics of Multiculturalism will be of special interest to students of Southeast Asian history and society, anthropologists grappling with questions of citizenship and culture, political scientists studying democracy across cultures, and all readers concerned with the prospects for civility and tolerance in a multicultural world.

Robert W. Hefner is professor of anthropology and director of the Program in Civil Society and Civic Culture at the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture, Boston University.

Photos: Front cover (clockwise from top)—Western outlet shops and cafes in Singapore; the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in central Kuala Lumpur, with its blend of Indian, Mogul, and Malay styles; gaily dressed dancers in Java. Back cover—Interfaith rally for religious harmony in the great hall of the sultan's palace in Yogyakarta, early 1999.

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