# POLITICS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON INDONESIA AND SOUTH KOREA

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**Abstrak**

Identitas nasional dibangun dan dikembangkan oleh negara-bangsa modern untuk tujuan memeroleh jatidiri nyata atau kebersamaan imajiner yang dapat memersatukan warga negara. Meskipun ada kriteria tertentu yang digunakan untuk mendefinisikan keanggotaan sebuah negara-bangsa; tetapi interaksi dengan "pihak lain" bisa saja mengikis batas-batas pengertian keanggotaan tersebut. Sejarah pembentukan dan pengembangan politik identitas nasional oleh sebuah rezim dari waktu ke waktu di Indonesia dan Korea menunjukkan perubahan dan adaptasi berbagai kriteria tersebut.

Kata Kunci: *national identity*, *ethnicity*, *nation-state*, *collective consciousness*

## A. PENDAHULUAN

Indonesia and South Korea (hereafter Korea) are located in Asia. Asia is a vast and extremely diverse region that defies simplistic generalisations. While a number of countries have fairly homogeneous populations, such as Japan and Korea, the population of a great number of countries in the region are multi-racial and multi-ethnics (Berger and Borer eds., 1997, p. 101). For instance, Indonesia has over 700 ethnic groups with distinct languages (not dialects) and traditions, while Malaysia is primarily composed of indigenous Malays and two other racial groups, Chinese and Indians. At the same time, almost all of the world's great religions and civilisations have left their imprints in Asia. South East Asia in particular has for centuries been at the cross roads of civilisations, adopting and adapting Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, as well as different variants of Christianity and Western cultures. The historical experience of one Asian country to another has also been different. While a few countries escaped direct foreign colonialism, several Asian countries experienced colonisations by different western colonial powers for long periods of time. Modern ideological conflicts have also touched different parts of Asia, sometimes violently, leaving their indelible marks in the region.

Given all of these varieties and differences in historical experience, it is to be expected that the formation of national identity and how it evolves over time would not be uniform throughout Asia. Nevertheless, despite the great regional diversity there are a number of common themes that can be found. This brief paper will only look at the experience of Korea and Indonesia by trying to describe the common characteristics they shared in constructing their national identities.

## B. PEMBAHASAN
### B.1. Theoritical Perspective

Modern social science and humanities have established that national identities are constructed by nation-states for the purpose of creating a collective consciousness of the people who live within a defined geographical space. National identities are used to delineate 'us' and 'them'; that is, who is a national of a nation-state and who is not. The dichotomisation between 'us' and 'them' is critical to the

existence of nation-states as it "ensures the continuity of the group as a form of social organisation" (Triandafyllidou, 2002).

The theory of national identity and nation-state was first put forward by Hans Kohn in 1945 in his book *The Idea of Nationalism*. National identity theories have since become mainstream in sociological circles, with prominent writers such Benedict Anderson and Ernest Geller in particular adding to the literature in this field. Despite their differences, these theorists all view nation-states as modern constructions. Nations, as social groups that share a common identity based on a shared ethnicity, language, culture or religion are not new. However, the idea that each nation should have its own sovereign territory, ruled by the state (a political institution with the highest authority) is said to have come about in the early nineteenth century.

The legitimacy of nation-states is premised on "the self-identification of a community of people who see themselves as having an observable sovereignty and identification of a political unit housing a culturally homogeneous group" (Nikolas, 1999). In other words, a certain degree of homogeneity of the people is essential for a cohesive nation-state. Homogeneity is artificially constructed through the use of national identities that prescribe what it is that distinguishes the members of a particular nation-state from nonmembers. In this way, nation-states create national identities based on what Anderson has called an 'imagined community', for nation-states are distinguished "not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 1983, p. 33). National identities are integral in promoting and perpetuating the legitimacy of the nation-state, because they identify the real or imagined commonalities that unite the people.

The two main criteria used to define a nation's identity are ethnicity and civic culture. Although once perceived to be mutually exclusive, these two criteria are now thought to be "collaborators in the journey towards nationhood and in the pursuit of the establishment of a nation-state" (Anderson, 1983, p. 47).

A national identity based on ethnicity prescribes membership determined by descent. Nationality is not voluntary. Rather, by birth and native culture, nationality is considered an inherent characteristic defined by descent as opposed to choice. National identities based on a civic culture require a group of people to be joined in a community based on respect for the rule of law. Membership in a civic culture is voluntary; people can choose which nation-state they wish to be a citizen of. The sovereignty of the people is located in the citizens themselves who possess a single political will. The people are ruled by a government that respects the law, rather than existing above it.

Whichever criterion is used to define a nation-state, it will not encompass every national, for no nation-state exists without minorities. However, by using a process of 'ambiguous inclusion' and 'unambiguous exclusion' nation-states can create a national identity that draws on commonalities of its nationals. Ambiguous inclusion requires the dissemination of invented traditions and national stereotypes that can be read in multifarious ways. In this way, ambiguous traditions and stereotypes serve to both unify the nation-state, whilst sustaining differences within the national groups. Anderson's 'imagined communities' can therefore be maintained by people's "diverse and complicated readings of ideological constructions of national identity" (Iwabuchi, 1994, p. 2).

Ambiguous inclusion is counterbalanced by 'unambiguous exclusion', that is, the process of defining clearly what it means to be a non-citizen. Although a nation-state may be populated by people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds,

citizens will be united if non-citizens or 'others' can be identified, as "[p]urity cannot mark itself through itself. Only impurity marks purity". The critical factor for defining the national group is "the social boundary which defines the group with respect to other groups, not the cultural reality within those borders" (Iwabuchi, 1994, p.3).

## B.2. Korea's National Identity

The Republic of Korea (RoK, *Daehan Minguk*) had to go through complex historical experiences before it could secure an identity amongst its people. The emotions caused by the term *gungmin* (nation) tended to be very complicated before the term gained a legal or natural meaning. On top of this, other words such as *sinmin* (subjects or citizens), *inmin* (people), and *minjok* (ethnic nation or race) competed with the term *gungmin* to create the concept we have today (Kwon, 2011, p. 13).

The establishment of the concept of the *gungmin* within the RoK involved a process that was more complicated than is usually the case. This is because Korea went through a complex process that saw it move from a monarchy system to being a colony before achieving independence amidst the division of the nation into North and South Korea. In 1948, two states emerged on the Korean peninsula: One was the Republic of Korea in South Korea and the other was the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in North Korea. These two countries employed different strategies as far as the management of the identity of the state was concerned. The former implemented a liberal democratic political system which emphasized the *gungmin*, while the latter maintained a people's democracy where the emphasis was on the *inmin*. Nevertheless, in both cases, the notion of *minjok* represented an essential resource in terms of the fostering of the identity of the state. This very complex historical path led to the formation of a unique concept of *gungmin*.

One of the main tasks of the newly-born Korea was that of identifying the manner in which the *gungmin* should be created within the liberated space. It is here that the political dynamism of the RoK becomes evident. Regardless of the extent of the chaos that emerged within the post-liberation space, a state could only have come into being through the creation of a *gungmin*.

According to the Constitution of the RoK, the people are defined as the main actors in the establishment of the state. The establishment of the government in 1948 was defined as the rebuilding of the state, and this was to be followed by the mobilization of the *minjok* based on "the determination to consolidate national unity with justice, humanitarianism and brotherly love" (Kwon, 2011, p. 25).

RoK, which was premised on the notion of an ethnically homogeneous state, adopted its constitution in a manner that was designed to consolidate family-oriented national unity. As evident in the following quote attributed to the first Minister of Culture and Education An Ho-sang, "It is only natural that we as members of Republic of Korea make exclusive use of the Korean alphabet system (*hangeul*) … What language would the *gungmin* of Korea use other than *hangeul*?" (*Kyunghyang Newspaper*, October 2, 1948). The *gungmin,* which had by then become regarded as one family, were expected to use one language. In addition, the members of the Republic of Korea were expected to worship national heroes that everyone could respect, such as Admiral Yi, who was described as follows, "His body is the state and his heart is the nation" (*Dong-A Ilbo*, December 8, 1948).

The newborn RoK inevitably adopted anti-communism as an implement to help foster the formation of a national identity. In China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) finally grasped political power after the civil war between itself and the

Kuomintang (KMT, or Nationalist Party). The CCP intended to spread communist reforms to backward areas such as Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the CCP intended to integrate Korea under the communist system, even if this meant resorting to war. This clear and present threat helped facilitate the strong sense of solidarity needed to foster the national unity required to cope with the threat of communism. This was not the fruit of the inverted slave consciousness of an anti-communist satellite state. Rather, it was the only method available to the government of the Republic of Korea to counter the communist party and unified front that sought to foster the internal collapse of the newborn government. This is the standpoint from which Syngman Rhee's one nation ideology (*ilmin juui*) should be understood. Moreover, we can also see that anti-communism represented an integral part of Syngman Rhee's one nation ideology. In his own words he stated, "It is impossible to counteract communism with democracy. This is because its ideology is too simple to resist against communist propaganda from a theoretical standpoint. As such, it is essential to establish one party, and based on the one nation ideology (*ilmin juui*), four political principles (*sadae jeonggang*) designed to condemn communism on the one hand and establish a permanent base for democracy on the other." (*Kyunghyang Newspaper*, April 23, 1949).

Based on that conception, Syngman Rhee introduced four principles which can be summarized as follows: (1) Overthrow lineages and pedigrees and promote equal rights, "unite into one ethnic nation (*minjok*) under the one law of one state" (2) Reap the benefits of the market based on joint cooperation between land holders, capital and labor (3) Establishment of equality between the sexes and national unity, and (4) Elimination of class divisions and regionalism (factionalism).

The first principle is evidence of the fact that the concept of the "one (ethnic) nation (*minjok*) of Korea" lay at the heart of the efforts to create a *gungmin* (national people). While Syngman Rhee advocated the unity of the *gungmin* over the class struggle promoted by communism, the term which he used to encompass such unity was that of one ethnic nation (*minjok*) of Korea. The second principle calls for the struggles between landlords, capital and laborers to be replaced by the sharing of the profits gleaned from the market. This principle sought to refute the communist logic that labor could only gain advantages for itself by overthrowing the landlords and capitalists. The third principle calls for gender equality and labor rights. This was designed to counter communism's claims that only it championed gender equality. Finally, the fourth principle was intended to overcome the regionalism that had plagued the Joseon era.

The notions of *minjok* and anti-communism continued to be used as tools with which to create a *gungmin* (national people) during the Park Chung-hee regime. During a ceremony to commemorate the 54th anniversary of the March First Movement, President Park Chung-hee promoted the nationalist perception of history (*minjok sagwan*) when he stated, "We should not allow any historical perception that views a specific class or party as the main actors" (*Kyunghyang Newspaper*, March 1, 1973).

In this regard, it remains very difficult to distinguish the identity of the *gungmin* from the overall Korean national identity. The situation remains generally unchanged despite the growing criticism of the myth of the single ethnic nation (*danil minjok*). The discordant nature of this situation is clearly evidenced by a look at the related amendments that have been made to the Constitution of the Republic of Korea.

While the phrase, "having determined to consolidate national unity with justice, humanitarianism and brotherly love" was removed from the Yushin Constitution of 1972 (amendment of the preamble, Article 8 of the Yushin Constitution, December 27, 1972), it was subsequently restored under the Chun Doo-hwan government (amendment of the Preamble, Article 8 of the Yushin Constitution, Article 9 of the Constitution, October 27, 1980) and remains in place under the current Constitution (amendment of the preamble, Article 10 of the Constitution, October 29, 1987). The inclusion of this passage can be regarded as the subconscious expression of the belief that there is no better way to ensure national unity than by advocating the notion of *minjok*.

## B.3. Indonesia's National Identity

Despite its tremendous diversity Indonesia has been characterised by its strong sense of nationalism and national identity. The shared historical experience of being under brutal Dutch rule had been the most important ingredient in uniting the heterogeneous people of the Indonesian Archipelago, who for the first time in history had been brought together under a single political unit by the Netherlands East Indies colonial administration. The nationalist movements succeeded in developing a new Indonesian national identity that transcended ethnic, racial and religious differences, uniting the peoples from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds in a common struggle for independence and the creation of a new Indonesian nation state. One of the most prominent founding fathers of modern Indonesia, Sukarno, engaged in myth making to create a new Indonesian national identity in the years before independence by glorifying the common past, castigating the dark colonial present and promising a bright future for the united and independent country.

Yet no sooner was independence achieved, Indonesia was wracked by over two decades of violent conflicts, including a civil war. A fundamental difference over ideologies, about whether Indonesia would become a pluralist secular state, an Islamic state or a communist state led to insurgencies, counterinsurgencies, massacres and political purges. The issue of ideology was only finally resolved in the mid 1980s when *Pancasila* was accepted as the sole foundation of the state. Despite the existence of a radical minority that continues to struggle for the creation of an Islamic state or the imposition of the *sharia* on Muslims, in general one can say that today ideology is no longer a contested issue in Indonesia. *Pancasila* or "5 Principles" was adopted as the Indonesian national ideology soon after the proclamation of independence in 1945. It is a compromise between those who wish to establish an Islamic state and those who want a secular state. The 5 Principles are: Belief in One God; Humanity; National Unity, Democracy and Social Justice.

Indonesia's first decade was marked by the rise and fall of parliamentary democracy (first free election held 1955; second held 1999); outbreak of regional rebellions Sumatra, Sulawesi, and West Java, most of which claimed to be struggling for Islamic state, though local grievances were paramount; rise of Indonesian military and Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as powerful political institutions; and dominance of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno.

Early 1960s Sukarno tried to maintain increasingly precarious political balance between PKI, which had grown to become third largest Communist Party in world outside Soviet Union and China, and military. In September 30, 1965, group of revolutionary junior officers backed by some members of PKI, murdered six generals

and announced they had taken power to forestall army coup. Major-General Soeharto, who some claim had prior knowledge of coup attempt, rallied army. Over next six months, Soeharto engineered transfer of power from Sukarno to himself and encouraged purge of PKI leaving as many as half a million dead. Worst killings took place East Java, where army encouraged local Muslim youth groups to take revenge for PKI's efforts to unilaterally seize and redistribute land, and in Bali and Aceh. There is widespread myth ethnic Chinese bore brunt of killings. While true that Soeharto accused People's Republic of China of backing "fifth column" of Indonesian Chinese, ethnic Chinese probably do not account for more than 2,000 of hundreds of thousands killed. Most were ethnic Javanese and Balinese.

The 30 September coup attempt and aftermath marked beginning of Soeharto's "New Order" government though he did not formally become president until 1967. His authoritarian government bears responsibility for most of Indonesia's conflicts, but seeds were planted earlier. Just as Indonesia's founding fathers had engaged in myth making to foster a common national identity that transcends racial, ethnic and religious differences, the Suharto regime also engaged in myth making by imbuing the Indonesian national identity with certain unchanging characteristics. Although the development of the nationalist movement and the birth of the modern nation states in Asia cannot be separated from western history and influences, particularly Western education and the influence of the French and the American revolutions, the New Order government argued that Indonesian national values wholly originated from within. The regime then proceeded to define what the Indonesian national identity was as well as the correct, and therefore politically acceptable, values associated with that identity. Such values included a strong sense of nationalism, an emphasis on consensus, respect for authority, the rejection of communism, Islamism or Western liberalism, as well as the deification of the national ideology and the 1945 Constitution so that the constitution could never be amended. By monopolising the definition of the national identity the New Order government was able to impose strict social and political control, accusing those with different ideas as subversives and enemies of the state. Ideas such as democracy and respect for human rights were considered foreign ideas, and therefore should be rejected. Continuing attachments to local or primordial identities or attraction to a supra-national regional or global identity were regarded as dangerous since these could undermine the national identity.

The experience of Indonesia was not unique. Just as national identities in Asia had in many cases been artificially constructed for political ends, such as national independence and the formation of modern nation states, politics had also played a dominant role in the articulation of national identities in the subsequent years. Before the Asian financial crisis many leaders in the region extolled the virtue of the "Asian Values", usually signifying that the people must be discipline, work hard, save their earnings and show unquestioning loyalty to their governments. The national identities that had been established in the respective countries were idealised, protected from challenges coming from within or outside the countries. As the protectors of the "true" national identities the regimes in power can then legitimately prosecute all of those who contest them, particularly those trying to offer alternative forms of identities. The "Asian Values" argument emerged as a reaction by certain Asian leaders, in particular Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia, to Western criticisms regarding the lack of democracy and respect for human rights in a number of Asian countries.

Soeharto years came to violent end May 1998, after Asian financial crisis added to growing dissatisfaction with his rule and his family's corruption. Vice-president, B.J. Habibie, succeeded Soeharto. Habibie's decision to allow East Timor referendum, and consequences of that decision ended his presidency October 1999. Muslim cleric and intellectual Abdurrahman Wahid became president, only to be impeached after disastrous presidency July 2001. Megawati Sukarnoputri, Sukarno's daughter, took over until country's first direct presidential elections in 2004, won by Gen. (ret.) Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono with 61 percent of vote.

Since May 1998, when Soeharto stepped down, Indonesia has undergone fundamental changes. More has been achieved than any of the well-informed political observers of the late New Order dared to imagine. No one predicted at the start of 1998 that within the next decade there would be peace in Aceh; freedom of the press; a withdrawal of the armed forces from political and administrative institutions; no fear in giving voice to protest; economic recovery; constitutional reform, which makes the return of authoritarian rule unlikely; an electoral democracy that functions well; and far-reaching administrative decentralisation, giving way to regional autonomy, making an end to the centralist state. Of course, each of these achievements has its dark side (Nordholt, 2008, pp. 1-21).

When the authoritarian New Order regime fell apart, the state ideology, *Pancasila*, lost its near hegemonic authority and was challenged by a wave of religious, ethnic and regional identity politics. The demise of Soeharto's New Order between 1997 and 2002 was accompanied by unprecedented civil warfare in West and Central Kalimantan, Central Sulawesi, and the Moluccas, which was fuelled by religious and ethnic sentiments. These civil wars showed the ugly face of ethnic and religious identity politics in Indonesia. Decentralisation and democratisation did not always coincide with violence, but there was an overall increase in exclusive regional identity politics. Because of democratisation and decentralisation, *Reformasi* intensified and accelerated these fragmented identities, which served as a means to mobilise new constituencies. The main victim of this process was, so it seemed, a shared sense of Indonesian citizenship. The notion of citizenship was not only marginalised by the rise of ethnic and religious identity politics, it was also undermined by the failure of civil society groups to establish political alternatives. If we take the deficiencies of civil society organisations vis-a-vis politics into consideration, we can conclude that in general the contribution of NGOs to democratisation in Indonesia is restricted to specific issues. Therefore Indonesia could be characterised as 'a single-issue democracy' in which larger questions concerning citizenship are still by and large ignored.

In his recent book on the history of the idea of Indonesia, Robert Elson (2008) concludes that a strong national identity failed to appear. After 1998, the elite was not capable of providing a new sense of what the idea of Indonesia represented. He points primarily at the inability to articulate a strong national identity, which results in disillusionment in the nation as a meaningful entity. It makes more sense to be a Muslim, a Batak or a Balinese than to believe in 'Indonesia'. This is only half the story because citizenship is not only rooted in the nation but also embedded in the state.

## C. PENUTUP

National identities are constructed by modern nation-states for the purpose of identifying real or imagined commonalities that unite a population. Although certain criteria, such as ethnicity and civic culture, are used to define who is a

member of a nation-state, it is the interaction with 'others' that delineates the boundaries of the 'in-group'. Two different countries –Korea and Indonesia – have, over time, changed the criterion used to define their national identities.

In the case of the RoK, the people of Korea only became *gungmin* of the RoK after having gone through a process that saw them be identified as *inmin* of the Joseon dynasty, *sinmin* of the Daehan Empire, and *sinmin* and *gungmin* of the Japanese empire. Fifty-one years elapsed from the establishment of the Daehan Empire in 1897 to the birth of the Republic of Korea in 1948. Therefore, the *gungmin* of Korea had to go through changes to the above-mentioned identities.

The concept of *minjok* can be regarded as having been the most important psychological resource used during the process of creating the identity of the RoK. The fact (or myth) of the single nation (*danil minjok*) proved to the most effective tool as far as appeals to national unity were concerned. The fact that Korea was colonized by Japan helped promote the notion that it was the Korean nation that had liberated itself from the rule of another *minjok* as the most effective method of transforming *inmin* into *gungmin*.

For all of the above reasons, the notion of *minjok* has played as important a role in the politics of identity in Korea as the notion of *gungmin*. North Korea has also made frequent use of the notion of one *minjok* (ethnic nation) as part of its united front approach to South Korea. As such, the *gungmin* of Korea should be perceived as having had to face and deal with the notion of *minjok* as part of the wider politics of identity.

The experience of Indonesia revealed that the nature of the regime in power determine how national identity is treated, whether it is seen as dynamic and open so that identitiy can be plural and evolve over time, or whether it is regarded as closed and utterly unique, thus allowing no more room for changes or for competitive identities to emerge.  In fact, an authoritarian regime in Indonesia created or manipulated national identity, endowing it with certain rigid characteristics as a means of political control.  The Indonesian experience under 32 years of Suharto's New Order authoritarian rule can help to illustrate this point.

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