

Sense and *Ethnic Sensibility*

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The current democratization trend is generally understood as a movement away from authoritarian practices toward greater participation and justice for the majority. But this notion puts aside, if not ignores, the matter of continuing marginalization of minority ethnic groups. While the right to self-determination is usually affirmed, the rhetoric belies the assumption that such will be to the bigger structure of the nation-state as constructed.

Indeed, while the post-colonial states born from nationalist fervor threw out an alien oppressor, in many instances, they put in place another ethnic elite. Many of these new ethnic elites immediately went about fashioning the structures and symbols of the new states in their image. The dominant elite's language was instituted as *the* "national language" — thus, Tagalog for the Filipinos; Burman for the Burmese. "National religions" were stipulated in their respective constitutions, albeit pledging tolerance for other faiths — so why single out one in the first place? We even have a national fruit (the mango), animal (carabao), hero (Jose Rizal), sport (sipa, or is it basketball?), what not, to complete the "national picture."

The Philippine flag is an unflappable evidence of the Tagalog/Manila-centeredness of mainstream Philippine nationalism. The eight rays in the sun signify the eight Tagalog provinces that first rose against Spanish rule in 1896. Nothing in the flag bears witness to the centuries of resistance put up by the Muslims in Southern Mindanao and the Cordillerans in Northern Luzon. The proposal to put in a crescent on the flag was, to many non-Muslims, a foolish, if not a dangerous idea. Many dismissed it curtly, arguing that one of the three stars represents Mindanao, anyway.

Expositions on the nature of democracy are no less to blame for the ethnic blindness of so-called democratic projects. For instance, democracy as a governance of, for and by the people has projected an image of "the people" who make up the state and society as a monolithic entity. As a system where leaders are elected and policies popularly adopted, it ignored the fact that majority votes culled from a dominant ethnic majority

bloc have been oppressive for smaller populations who easily lose out in such count-offs.

Counter-elites in present day social and political movements, alas, have not escaped this pitfall. Josef Silverstein's exposition on the political thought of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, particularly on the idea of freedom, traces two sources — the Buddhist religion, tradition and culture, and values imparted by British colonialism. Revolts against colonialism led by monks or ex-monks, and the rise of groups such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association are cited as historical beginnings of this notion of freedom. Much as I would not want to disparage the "national history" of Burma, one can easily see that these freedom movements were political projects founded on and led by an all male-and-Buddhist core. They count little in the "national history" of the Karens.

Today, Aung San Suu Kyi has provided the female presence in this male core but the Burman-Buddhist leadership base of the democracy movement remains. In this light, one cannot help wonder if the National League of Democracy will be in any better position to approach the ethnic question with more circumspect.

There is also the instability in the immediate post-colonial situation that impels political leaders to feel safer with a highly centralized state, thus aborting the potential of instituting autonomous local centers of power where local ethnic groups can exercise self-governance. Federalism, as in the case of a country as huge and ethnically diverse as Indonesia, was not an option at all to its nationalist leaders. Our own constitutional format in 1946, while often described as patterned after the U.S.'s presidential and two-party system, actually vested more powers on our president than what the U.S. constitution gives its presidency. Also, while the U.S. has a federal government, the P.I. (Philippine Islands), later on the R.P. (Republic of the Philippines), has always been a unitary state. Calls for federalism have not gathered enough momentum. Perhaps because it is too drastic a change for a yet fragile state, not to mention the vested interests who have comfortably settled in their respective niches of the status quo.

Only the recent spate of "ethnic conflicts" has made peoples and states more conscious of the need for a "minority democracy," in contrast to a "majority democracy." In the former, political and social ends address the interests of the elite majority ethnic group but are equally conscious of safeguarding minority group interests.

This is not to say that constructing institutions, parties and movements on the basis of ethnicity is always a good thing. Danger also lurks in such a set-up, especially if left in the hands of unscrupulous politicians. Thus in countless texts, one finds the argument that ethnic conflicts are actually disguised class conflicts; so-called ethnic wars, actually power struggles. Ethnicity only becomes the platform to mobilize a constituency. True for a good number of cases, but one also finds in many societies, North or South, that the poorest of the poor and those who have least access to political processes are indeed distinguishable by their ethnic stock.

Ethnic mobilization is perhaps necessary for some time to drive home the point. Consociational set-ups where ethnic-based formations are supposed to guarantee equal participation could even out the playing field. But it need not be the everlasting hallmark of groups. Identities, after all, evolve with time and histories can be reconstructed. A common civic culture strong on tolerance and respect for peoples' and individual rights and a shared ecosystem can provide an umbrella for diverse identities under a single political and social order. A polity that provides ample space for broader participation — for women, ethnic minorities, and the poor — can, in fact, de-emphasize the ethnic question (and the gender and class questions, for that matter) from the political arena and place it in the social sphere where hopefully, it can be allowed to interact harmoniously with the countless other types of relations that operate in this realm. ●

Beyond the Transition, Towards Consolidation

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The transition from authoritarian to democratic rule is attended by continuities and discontinuities that are often as intractable as the revolution that precedes it. For one, the state does not necessarily go away in the revolution's aftermath. For another, a new ethos or *Weltansicht* that would overhaul the vestiges of the overthrown order is not inevitably born out of the latter's demise. This is why social movements, who, in the *moment* of revolution or transformation, are able to act as powerful catalysts or change-agents, often find themselves nearly helpless, if not lost, in the *process* of the ensuing transition. Armed with skills that are designed more to oppose and discredit, than push forward and negotiate, governance and policy, these advocates of change, now also potential participants in the *new status quo*, discover themselves at a disadvantage