

# Liberalism, Communism, Islam

## Transnational Motors of 'Nationalist' Struggles in Southeast Asia

Research >  
South Asia

In my reading and teaching on Southeast Asia over the past several years, I have come to believe that existing scholarship has underestimated the role of crucial transnational forces – most notably nineteenth-century Liberalism, twentieth-century Communism, and 'modernist' Islam – in favour of more narrowly national, and nationalist, narratives. Therefore, in the course of two years of research and writing, I shall be working to elaborate and substantiate a revisionist account of what scholars have described as nationalist struggles in Southeast Asia, one which shows how the driving forces behind these struggles were profoundly transnational in nature.

By John Sidel

The intellectual backdrop to this project is, of course, the influential account of nationalism provided by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, which draws on Southeast Asian history and has powerfully shaped its subsequent historiography. Anderson's arguments about the role of colonial administrative boundaries, bureaucratic and educational pilgrimages, and languages of state in generating modern national consciousness indeed tell us much about the once seemingly arbitrary, but strikingly enduring, boundaries of national identity in Southeast Asia. These arguments allow us to trace and explain much of the variation in the trajectories and forms of nationalism in the region.

Yet Anderson's and other scholars' subsequent writings suggest alternative accounts, in which the boundaries of national identity and sovereignty are understood as externally imposed limits and domesticating constraints on other, profoundly transnational impulses and aspirations, rather than as the engines or goals of nationalist struggle. These accounts show that so-called 'nationalist struggles' – as they are usually glossed – are driven by transnational networks, movements, and horizons. Arising out of Southeast Asians' encounters with capitalist modernity and their exposure to and incorporation within international ideological currents and institutional networks, these currents and networks extended beyond the boundaries of the colony and even of the colonial metropolises. As such, they provided an especially subversive vantage point from which Southeast Asians could understand, and challenge, colonial rule. Thus, rather than nationalists undertaking nationalist struggles, the proponents of Liberalism, Communism, and Islam actually constituted the driving force of anti-colonial revolutions. With national independence and the inevitable crystallization of 'official nationalism' the most subversive and mobilizing impulses of these movements, networks, and horizons were domesticated. Their roles in independence struggles have been retrospectively downplayed and attributed to that of 'popular nationalism'. Yet, some of these transnational forces live on, most notably those associated with Islamic learning, worship, and associational activity.

It is essential to trace these transnational threads towards and beyond the achievement of national independence through rigorous comparative analysis of the diverging forms and outcomes of anti-colonial struggles in Southeast Asia. The first thread relates to the inherently transnational force of capitalism, specifically with regard to the diverging

fates of the immigrant 'Chinese' (and 'Arab' and 'Indian') merchant communities. As commercial and financial intermediaries they played crucial roles in colonial Southeast Asia and have dominated its business classes since independence. The second and most original thread entails the three most important transnational ideologies, networks, and horizons which captivated the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – Liberalism, Communism, and Islam – in the lived experiences and activities of both the urban intelligentsia(s) and broader mass publics. The third thread concerns colonial and post-colonial responses of state authorities, as they worked with varying success, and with diverse (and often unintended) consequences, to create boundaries of various kinds to contain and domesticate these transnational forces. Combined with the broader context of international conflicts, most notably World War II, these threads combine to weave a tapestry of modern Southeast Asian history and politics that refutes existing scholarly literature, which has long stressed the peculiarities of individual countries and the processes of 'localization'.

### Liberalism and Freemasonry

In this context, for example, the Revolution in the Spanish colonial Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century might be understood not as Asia's first nationalist revolution, but as a product of the rising tide of Liberalism in the archipelago. The opening of Philippine ports in the mid-nineteenth century, after all, brought the ascendant class of assimilated Chinese *mestizo* merchants, moneylenders, and landowners into direct contact with British and other non-Spanish traders, raising fears of Liberal, Protestant, and Freemason influence among the conservative administrative and ecclesiastical hierarchies in the colony. Meanwhile, the experiences of the privileged children of this class who ventured beyond the Philippine Archipelago were highly formative. Not only did they find Spain in the throes of conflict between Liberals and the entrenched forces of Church and Crown; elsewhere in Europe they discovered republicanism and post-Enlightenment thought far 'ahead' of backward Spain. Socializing in London, painting in Paris, and corresponding with academics in Berlin, these highly cosmopolitan, polyglot *ilustrados* aspired for Liberal reforms in Spain and the Philippines, curbing the power of Church and Crown.

This exposure to ideas and associational forms beyond the Philippines and beyond Spain inspired not only the narrowly elitist Propaganda Movement but also the more plebeian (and distinctly Freemason-like) Katipunan. Yet the lim-

its of these transnational horizons soon became apparent, both in the tensions within the Revolution itself, and in the aftermath of US occupation and colonization of the archipelago at the turn of the century. With the United States as its colonial master and as the ascendant global hegemon, and with colonial democracy and Filipinization entrenching the Chinese *mestizo* elite in the seats of state power, European cosmopolitanism and Liberalism ceased to provide a subversive vantage point from beyond the metropole or a horizon for struggle in the colony. Hence the striking weakness of 'nationalist' movements in the American colonial Philippines in the twentieth century.

### From Republicanism to Communism

In the starkly contrasting case of the Vietnamese Revolution much that has long been attributed to extraordinary patriotic fervour can likewise be recast in terms of Vietnam's unparalleled exposure to and immersion within transnational currents and international conflicts. After all, China was not only the origin of an immigrant merchant minority but a huge, dynamic neighbour whose historical influences on Vietnamese culture and its own internal transformations exposed intellectuals to sources of inspiration and forces of change far beyond colonial control. Schooled in Chinese language and literature and steeped in the Confucian classics, Vietnamese intellectuals were unique in Southeast Asia in their unmediated access to the enormous intellectual and political energy and ferment in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and to Chinese logistical support and military hardware after 1949). This abiding access to China combined with other networks, experiences, and visions across national boundaries, making Vietnam a particularly hospitable site for revolutionary mobilization in the mid-twentieth-century. For by the end of World War I, more than 100,000 Vietnamese soldiers had served in Europe, and many more sojourners came to France in the following two decades, where they found a political atmosphere in which socialist and communist parties enjoyed far greater influence and freedom than their counterparts in other colonial metropolises. From participating in the founding of the French Communist Party in Paris in 1920, it was a short leap for Ho Chi Minh to begin working for the Comintern in Moscow, resurfacing in southern China and eventually in northern Vietnam with a set of experiences, ideals, organizational tools, and, it might be added, opportunities, which were very different from those available to José Rizal and his compatriots half a century earlier in the

Philippines. Far beyond any other colony in Southeast Asia, Vietnamese intellectuals were exposed and attracted to powerful transnational currents emanating both from China and from Europe, even as the proximity of China, the networks of Vietnamese migrants in neighbouring Laos, Cambodia, and, beyond French Indochina, independent Siam, and the unique circumstances of a Vichy French-Japanese condominium in 1941-45 offered additional room for revolutionary manoeuvre.

### Nasionalisme, Agama, Komunisme

If we take Indonesia as a final example, yet another point of transnational influence comes into view. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the ferment in China culminating in the Revolution of 1911 inspired and emboldened the small 'Chinese' mercantile minority in the Dutch East Indies, spurring innovations in associational activity and demands for greater freedoms in the colony. These trends, in turn, stimulated a 'native' reaction, most notably the founding of the Sarekat Islam in 1912, first as a mutual aid society for batik traders in Java, and by the end of the decade as a vehicle for broader popular radical mobilization.

Within the Sarekat Islam, two ideological strains merged, intermingled, and competed for supremacy, each with its own source of origins and inspiration far from the Indonesian Archipelago. On the one hand, the currents of Islamic reformism emanating from the Middle East had begun to wash up on the shores of Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi, carried by Arab immigrants from the Hadramaut, returning pilgrims from the Hajj, and scholars returning from Al-Azhar in Cairo and other major centres of Islamic learning. Thus the early decades of the twentieth century saw considerable expansion and innovation in the realm of Islamic schooling in the Dutch East Indies, with the founding of modernist *madrasah* and the formation of modernist organizations like Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam, and Al-Irsyad, drawing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Muslims into new circuitries of education, experience, association, and consciousness. On the other hand, the sources of inspiration and organization which had carried Ho Chi Minh and his comrades from Paris to Moscow to southern China to the villages of Tonkin and Annam exerted similar drawing power in the Indies. Comintern emissaries and local Communist organizers began to enjoy increasing success organizing workers on the expanding railroads and plantations.

While various Dutch policies, not least the repression which followed hard on the heels of the failed rebellions of 1926-27, kept these two 'hidden forces' in check until the Japanese invasion and occupation in 1942-45, their

attractive energies remained powerful for years to come. Indeed, the nationalist cause championed by Sukarno rallied Indonesians around his slogan of NASAKOM – *Nasionalisme, Agama* (Religion), *Komunisme* – and, under circumstances decisively different from those facing Vietnamese revolutionaries, both Communist and Islamic networks resurfaced in the Revolusi of 1945-49 that followed the Japanese interlude. Even as nationalist leaders like Soekarno engaged in diplomatic negotiations with the Dutch, popular resistance persisted, especially where the ideals and organizations associated with transnational Communism and Islam enjoyed greatest strength.

Thus the first 50 years of independence have been dominated by tension between the residues of these two very different transnational currents of mobilization and by the domesticating impulses and imperatives of successive national state leaders. Today, the alleged members of the shadowy Jemaah Islamiyah network emerged out of Islamic schools affiliated with conservative modernist groups – Al-Irsyad and Persatuan Islam – founded in the 1910s and 1920s. With the demise of global Communism and the triumph of global Liberalism, the school networks, pilgrimages, and intellectual circuitries associated with Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia, the southern Philippines, and Thailand constitute the one remaining potentially counter-hegemonic transnational force in the region.

A revisionist account of the formative struggles of modern Southeast Asian history contests the existing scholarly literature, which has tended to focus on individual nationalist narratives and to stress processes of cultural translation, indigenization, and localization. The guiding influences of Liberalism, Communism, and Islam in the modes of expression and forms of political association and activity of the urban intelligentsia, who occupy centre stage in most accounts of 'nationalist movements' in Southeast Asia, must be demonstrated rather than merely asserted. In the trajectories of movement recruitment and mass mobilization, moreover, this new history 'from above' must be connected to existing histories 'from below'. Finally, the complex pattern of variation in the forms, outcomes, and aftermaths, of those struggles primarily understood as nationalist, must be made compellingly clear, by using various points of comparison within and beyond the region.

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At the invitation of Oskar Verkaaik (IIAS), John Sidel presented a lecture at the University of Amsterdam on the broad outlines of his two-year research project on 8 May 2003.