

Research Summary

In brief, it is argued that there are two forms of nationalism, ethnic nationalism (ethnonationalism) and civic nationalism. Ethnonationalism links nationalism to ethnicity where it privileges the language, culture and identity of a particular ethnic; such that national integration is conceived in terms of constructing a “nation” of citizens sharing a common language, culture and values. In contrast, civic nationalism starts with the premise that every citizen has an equal bundle of rights, including cultural and language rights, and in this way nation building creates spaces for ethnic minorities to preserve and reproduce their languages and cultures. Ethnonationalism has been around longer than civic nationalism and indeed it remains the predominant form today. As ethnonationalism remains the predominant national form found in most countries, it impedes the increasing multiculturalization of society brought about by globalization. A multicultural state is only realizable when civic nationalism prevails.

While ethnonationalism has prevailed in both Japan and Malaysia, their nation building projects nevertheless resulted in different outcomes. In the Japanese nation building experience, to a large extent the state successfully created a linguistically and culturally homogeneous community where ethnic minorities were forced to adopt the dominant ethnic group’s language and culture. Ainu and Koreans provide contrasting ways ethnic minorities have experienced and contested the Japanese state homogenizing project. The upshot, however, is that historically the state did not recognize nor grant the minorities their language and cultural rights – until only recently. In contrast, in Malaysia the Malay-dominated state could not carry its project to homogenize the ethnic minorities because political power was not monopolized by Malays, rather Malays had to share political power with the Chinese and Indians, and later with the non-Malay minorities of Sabah and Sarawak. Because they had to share political power, Malay ethnonationalists had to make compromises with minorities, especially Chinese and Indians, on language and cultural matters. Indeed, the Malaysian national educational system includes Chinese and Tamil medium primary schools which the Chinese and Indian communities insist are crucial to the preservation of their languages and cultures. In other words, minorities are not coerced into assimilating the language and culture of the dominant group in Malaysia.

While ethnonationalism is deeply entrenched in both Japan and Malaysia, differences in the historical development of ethnic majority-minority relations in the two countries have differently prepared them for the multiculturalizing trend brought about by globalization. The institutionalization of the homogenizing project created cultural inertia and entrenched vested interests in Japan, making it hard for the state to switch from assimilationist to multicultural policies. At the societal level, non-Japanese encounter various difficulties and obstacles in interacting with and relating to their Japanese counterparts; even Japanese returnees (kikokushijo) and Japanese Brazilians in varying degrees remain as outsiders in Japan. In Malaysia, although Malay ethnonationalists still resist strongly the increasing multiculturalization of Malaysian society, nevertheless the state has implemented policies which are more inclusive of minority languages and cultures. In the field of education, the Chinese, students can practically now acquire a Chinese medium education from primary to tertiary level. For Indonesian emigrants who are Muslims, they can ‘masuk Melayu’ (become Malay) with ease and become a member of the Malay ethnic. Hence, presently multiculturalism encounters more hurdles in Japan than Malaysia.