

Migrants, Minorities, and Populists in Asia

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Abstract

Populists in East and Southeast Asia generally refrain from invoking anti-migrant and anti-minority sentiments as part of their mobilizational strategies. This differentiates them from populists in Europe and the United States, even though many Asian countries are diverse societies with long histories of migration and ethnic chauvinism. In this memo I propose that Asian populists work within rather than against existing categories of peoplehood that were set alongside the onset of mass politics. Because these categories of peoplehood remain salient today, they constrain contemporary Asian populists—and some important counterexamples illustrate the limits of such constraint. The Asian experience thus reveals the flexibility of identity, nation, and membership in contemporary populism.

Introduction

Contemporary European and American populists commonly target migrants, refugees, and religious and ethnic minorities as foreign elements whose very presence represents a threat to the survival of “the people.” Yet despite the resurgence of populism in contemporary Asia, populists there generally eschew anti-migrant and anti-minority discourses, targeting instead elites, criminals, and other elements whose behavior—rather than identity—threatens the nation. How can we explain this divergence? Where are the anti-immigrant, anti-minority Asian populists?

In this memo I propose two answers to this question, one of which is uninteresting and the other which is perhaps more interesting. The uninteresting answer is that democratic Japan and South Korea have but tiny immigrant communities and ethnic minority populations, and so there is simply no politically salient minority or migrant community for populists to target. The more interesting answer focuses on the plural societies of Taiwan and Southeast Asia, which feature politically salient ethnic and religious cleavages as well as long histories of migration. In these cases, mass migration tended to occur under colonial rule or at the moment of independence. The fundamental negotiations about membership in the national political community—what constituted the people—happened alongside the emergence of mass politics. As a result, multiethnic societies have variously followed assimilationist, accommodationist, or exclusionary practices (Singh and vom Hau 2016), but in no cases do minorities or migrants and their descendants represent a threat to the integrity or survival of the people as generally understood.

In short form, my argument is that Asian populists work *within* rather than *against* existing categories of peoplehood. Because categories of peoplehood remain salient today, they constrain contemporary Asian populists. Across East and Southeast Asia, minorities and migrants have—

with notable exceptions—been identified as part of the people rather than in opposition to them. As a rule, then, Asian populism more resembles the inclusionary populism of Latin America rather than the exclusionary populism of Europe (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Asian populism can coexist with virulent prejudice and ethnic and religious conflict, but populists almost never invoke migrants or minorities to mobilize “the people” against “the elites” or “the other.” The “almost never” clause in the preceding sentence is important: cases of Chinese Indonesians, Rohingya, and migrants in Singapore and Malaysia prove instructive in delimiting the scope of this general argument.

On Populism

Populism is an “essentially contested” concept (Gallie 1955) and I will not take a position on the debate around its nature or origins (see van Kessel 2014: for a review). However, all conceptualizations of populism of which I am aware invoke the idea of “the people.” For Mouffe (2016: 1), populism “emerges when one aims at building a new subject of collective action—the people—capable of reconfiguring a social order lived as unfair.” For Müller (2016: 20), “populism requires a *pars pro toto* argument and a claim to exclusive representation, with both understood in a moral, as opposed to empirical, sense. There can be no populism, in other words, without some speaking in the name of the people as a whole.” For Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 6), populism is “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale*.” For Mouzelis (1985: 334), who conceptualizes populism as a linkage strategy, “populist leaders are hostile to strongly institutionalized intermediary levels, whether clientelist or bureaucratic. The emphasis on the leader’s charisma, on the necessity for direct, nonmediated rapport between the leader and ‘his people’; as well as the relatively sudden process of political incorporation all lead to a fluidity of organizational forms.”

So long as “the people” lie at the hard core of any conceptualization of populism, we can ask how different conceptualizations of peoplehood affect populist discourses and/or strategies without taking a position on populism’s true essence. This is the approach that I follow here.

Asian Populisms

Contemporary Asian populists include Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia, and Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand. These are politicians who have sought to represent in various ways the will of the people, to bypass or at least to subordinate existing political structures in response to dire social ills, and to cast themselves as the opponents of a corrupt political establishment comprised of unresponsive elites.¹ Additional members of the roster of populists in Asia might include Indonesia’s Joko Widodo, Burma’s Aung San Suu Kyi, and Philippine presidents Ramon Magsaysay, Ferdinand Marcos, and Joseph Estrada.

¹ As such, they fulfill key definitional features for any conceptualization of populism reviewed above.

One characteristic feature of the contemporary Asian populists is their targeting of both a corrupt ruling elite and distasteful social elements involved in crime and vice (see Pepinsky 2017). They stress the inability of existing political institutions to address these disorderly social elements, and they claim to hold (or in the case of Prabowo, they seek) a popular mandate to “fix” their countries’ political systems. They also, like nearly every other politician in these countries, run on platforms that emphasize (although often in vague terms) the people’s welfare and social progress. Importantly, each of these politicians campaigns in an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous state with a prominent “overseas Chinese” community. Ethnic and religious cleavages tend to be overlaid with differences in economic status material power.

It is noteworthy that these populists are all from Southeast Asia rather than from East Asia. Why the absence of East Asian examples? The case of China (PRC) is easy to exclude from a discussion of populism because it is not a democracy, but postwar Japan and contemporary South Korea and Taiwan could in principle feature populist campaigns and mobilization. Various analysts have detected populist strands in the public image and personal style of the LDP’s Junichiro Koizumi and Korea’s Roh Moo-Hyun in the 2000s (see the contributions to Phongpaichit and Mizuno 2009) and in election of Moon Jae-In in 2017. But because Korea and Japan are essentially mono-ethnic societies with low rates of naturalization for non-Koreans or non-Japanese, the question of whether or not populists in Japan and Korea mobilize anti-migrant or anti-minority sentiments is not very interesting. To be clear, both Japan and Korea are home to a substantial population of migrant workers from China and Southeast Asia, but strict regulations on their terms of employment, residence, and citizenship render them relatively powerless. They do not, currently, threaten to undermine the monoethnic image of Japanese or Korean society.²

The case of Taiwan does feature a strong and politically salient cleavage between mainland and Taiwanese identity groups, with the former sometimes couched as “migrants” and the latter “natives.” Discussions of populism in Taiwan normally focus on the Democratic Progressive Party, the challenger to the long-dominant Kuomintang (e.g. Shyu 2008). But in my read, this is an abuse of terminology that confuses populism with policies designed to mobilize a mass constituency in the era of democratic politics. Following Mouffe (2005), the depth of the political cleavage between KMT and DPP in Taiwan probably renders populist challengers to an unresponsive and undifferentiated political class impossible in the near future.

Asian Chauvinisms

Southeast Asia’s plural societies are characterized by ethnic and religious chauvinism. Marked interethnic and interreligious wealth disparities feed into resentment, frequently by “indigenous” populations against exploitation by “immigrant” minorities, in particular the overseas Chinese. There are also cleavages among indigenous groups: between central Thai and Isan in Thailand, between ethnic Burmans and non-Burmans, between Malays and non-Malay *bumiputeras*³ in Malaysia, between Ilocanos and Visayans in the Philippines, between Madurese and Dayaks in

² I do not mean to endorse that image of monoethnicity—it is a construction that in the Japanese case erases competing identities such as Ryukyuan or Dekasegi—but merely to acknowledge that it exists.

³ *Bumiputera* = “sons of the soil,” a term commonly used to refer to “indigenous” Malaysians who are of neither Chinese nor Indian descent.

Indonesian Borneo, and so forth. Religious cleavages also abound throughout the region: Catholic versus Muslim in the Philippines; Buddhist versus Muslim in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia; and Muslim versus Christian and Hindu in Indonesia and Malaysia. Although regionwide ethnic diversity defies easy classification, within each specific national or even subnational context, prejudices are well-understood (“Isan are stupid country folk,” “Madurese are coarse and crass,” “Rohingya are terrorists,” “Chinese are greedy,” etc.).

It is not surprising, then, that national politicians in Southeast Asia have sometimes openly embraced ethnic chauvinism. The most notable examples deal with the overseas Chinese. Malaysia’s long-time prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, for example, famously penned a book called *The Malay Dilemma* which outlined a stark economic and political plan to favor the country’s Malay majority at the expense of Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent. Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew was fond of addressing the need for “human capital” and “foreign talent,” linking these to immigration from China and India. To these contemporary examples we might add historical examples in those countries where Chinese are seen as much more integrated than in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore: Phibun Songkhram’s anti-Chinese measures in post-1932 Thailand, or anti-Chinese measures taken by both Liberal and Nationalist governments in the early years of Philippine independence. Prabowo, Thaksin, and Duterte all live in societies marked by some degree of chauvinism against minorities and the descendants of migrants.

Returning to the question that I outlined in the introduction, then, where are the anti-immigrant, anti-minority Asian populists? The answer cannot be that there are no populists in Asia, or that there are no anti-minority or anti-immigrant discourses in Asia. I propose that the answer, instead, lies in the timing of the construction of peoplehood at the onset of mass politics. East and Southeast Asian states take one of two forms: (1) ethnically homogenous states that maintain strong barriers to citizenship, (2) or ethnically heterogenous states that set inclusive and multiethnic terms of peoplehood prior to the onset of mass politics and have not faced subsequent rounds of immigration. Neither of these conditions are conducive to anti-immigrant or anti-minority populism.

Before proceeding, one might object to this argument by observing that because I have focused on “the people” as the hard core element of any conceptualization of populism, then racists, chauvinists, or particularists who divide “the people” cannot be populists by definition. Yet this would be to miss the point of my argument. It would be possible for a Thai politician to invoke a notion of Thai-ness that targets Chinese of Thai descent as foreign elements. It would similarly be possible for a politician of Javanese descent in Indonesia to target relatively prominent ethnic minorities such as the Batak of Sumatra as representing elite interests. So, too, might a Japanese politician target the very small number of ethnic Koreans living in Japan as criminal, foreign, or otherwise undesirable elements. The point is simply that none of these conceptual possibilities would be politically expedient as a strategy for an aspiring populist leader or movement seeking to construct or mobilize the Thai, Indonesian, or Japanese people.

Citizenship, Membership, and the Emergence of Mass Politics

My argument rests on two claims. First, existing categories of peoplehood constrain the discursive or ideational strategies available to populists. In plural societies such as Indonesia, minority ethnic and religious communities are unambiguously members of the *rakyat* (or “people”). Second, timing matters. In Asia, the terms of peoplehood or nationhood were “set” at or shortly after independence. The very project of nationalist mobilization required the delineation of what that nation was, with the result that even multiethnic polities such as Indonesia and the Philippines could create national identities: choosing national languages and delimiting borders that included all people living within them as part of the national community.⁴ Ferguson (2015: 10) describes the example of Burma:

the vision for a newly independent Burma crucially depended on an image that included these eight official races, and this independent nation posited its indigeneity in opposition to foreign control, and more specifically, against non-indigenous capitalists such as the Chinese, Indians, and Europeans.

That these independent states with their emerging nations coincided with the borders of colonial territories is no accident: the Burmese state would occupy the territory of British Burma, and the Burmese people would be the Burmans and all of the “national races” that lived there as well.

Nationalist mobilization in Southeast Asia occurred at the same time as the onset of mass politics, and followed a general pattern in which religious, nationalist, and socialist mass organizations rejected European and American colonial rule (and later Japanese occupation). Religious examples include the Young Men’s Buddhist Association in Burma and Sarekat Islam in Indonesia; nationalist examples include the Katipunan in the Philippines, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, and the United Malays National Organisation; socialist and communist examples include the communist parties found throughout the region. Each of these groups advanced a different vision of mass politics, but they shared the notion that there existed a people throughout the colony who deserved to participate in that politics.⁵ Exclusionary visions for mass politics—such as the so-called “Jakarta Charter” which would have implemented sharia law in Indonesia—were ultimately defeated by more inclusionary visions.

Populists in Asia today thus confront ideas of the nation or the people that have previously been defined as multiethnic and inclusive of migrants and their descendants. There are exceptions; I address them in the conclusion. But my central point is that nations and peoples are plural—and this is self-evidently and unproblematically true throughout the region.

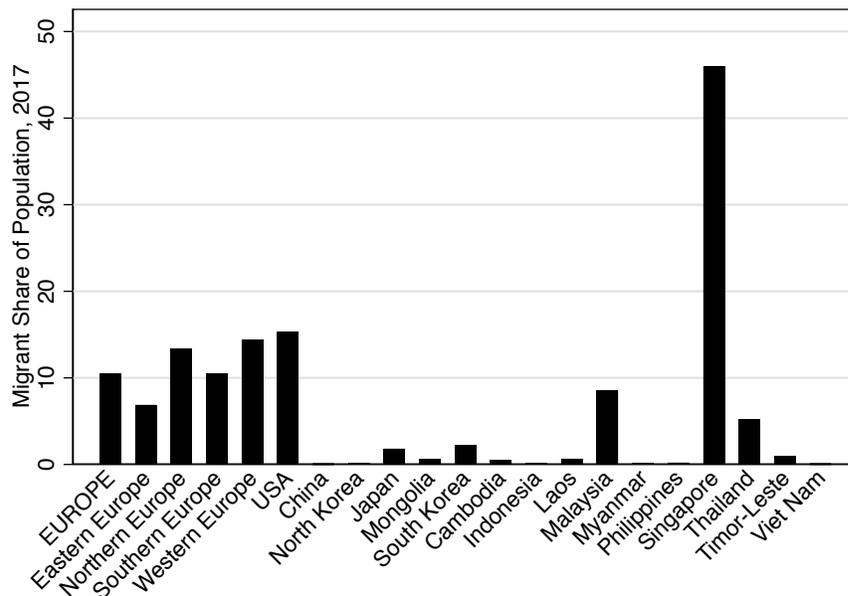
How have populations in the region changed since independence? Not substantially in most cases. Differences in relative birth rates and outmigration led to small changes in relative ethnic

⁴ Thus, an ethnic Lao living on the east bank of the Mekong River under French authority would become a citizen of the Kingdom of Laos and a member of the Lao nation. An ethnic Lao living on the west bank of the Mekong River under Thai authority would become a citizen of Thailand and an ethnic Isan member of the Thai nation.

⁵ Thailand is a special case because it was never colonized. Yet two features of Thai’s political development generated comparable understanding of Thai peoplehood: the monarchy’s construction of “Thailand” and hence the Thai nation as the people occupying the territory between French Indochina and British Burma (Thongchai 1994), and the Free Thai movement during the Second World War.

and religious shares in most countries, meaning that for example, the Malay population share in Malaysia is slightly larger today than it was at independence. But genocide in Cambodia and the mass emigration of ethnic Chinese and Catholics from Vietnam represent the biggest shocks to any country’s ethnic or religious landscape since independence—and note that these shocks had the effect of making Cambodia “more Khmer” and Vietnam “more Vietnamese” due to the disproportionate murder and flight of ethnic Chinese (and in Cambodia, the Cham and Vietnamese). Immigration is relatively rare outside of Singapore and to a lesser extent Malaysia and Thailand, as shown in [Figure 1](#) (data are from United Nations 2017).

Figure 1: International Migrant Stock in East and Southeast Asia



As a result, across East and Southeast Asia, the shape of “the people” at independence (or, in the cases of Japan and Thailand, at the onset of mass politics) is roughly the same as the people today. Asian states (aside from Singapore) have simply no experience with changing migrant populations that parallels the United States or Europe.

The *ethnic* or *religious* demarcation of the “the people” in Asia follows the terms set at the onset of mass politics across the region. This, I propose, explains why the region’s populists do not target migrants or minorities—because they understand that “the people” does not exclude these groups in the popular understanding, and so it would not resonate with their intended audience as a discursive or mobilizational strategy. The archetype of a European- or American-style populist leader, who challenges the political establishment in the name of the people while invoking tropes of anti-minority and anti-migrant threat, simply does not exist.

I emphasize that the preceding observation does not rule out ethnic politics or chauvinism, but rather *populist mobilization through* anti-migrant or anti-minority politics. The example of Malaysia makes this point clear. The Malaysian constitution provides special rights for the country’s ethnic Malay majority. But the Malaysian constitution also explicitly rules *in* non-

Malays as citizens by establishing the legal principles through which non-Malays achieved citizenship at independence (and their descendants would inherit it). Politics at independence was structured around ethnic cleavages. The question of the right of non-Malays to live in and become citizens of the Federation of Malaya was settled early, and subsequent political wrangling focused almost exclusively on the privileges granted to Malays and other *bumiputeras*. Then as today, ethnic redistributivist demands are channeled not through populist channels, but through an organized and highly institutionalized political party, the United Malays National Organisation. Landmark personalities such as Tunku Abdul Rahman, Razak Hussein, and Mahathir Mohamad are consummate political insiders who achieved power through the ranks of the party. Racists, chauvinists, and bigots abound in Malaysian politics, but there is no populist challenger in Malaysia who adopts a language of anti-migrant or anti-minority in order to unite Malays or *bumiputeras* as “the people” in response to “the elites” and other unsavory elements. As Weiss (2018) observes, Malaysian politics is just not populist at all.⁶

Conclusion: Counterfactuals and Test Cases

If my argument is correct, then follows that populists in Asia will only be able to mobilize anti-migrant and anti-minority discourses (1) for groups whose status as members of the nation or people was not set at independence, or (2) in the context of new rounds of mass immigration.

Overseas Chinese comprise the single most visible “migrant” minority across the region, and so they offer an important test case. Each country in Southeast Asia had to develop a legal framework for incorporating the overseas Chinese as citizens of the newly independent states. Following Goodman (2014: 17-21), we may distinguish between citizenship (a formal legal status) and *membership*, a broader category that connotes belonging. New laws established the terms of citizenship for overseas Chinese across Asia, but there is variation across the region in the extent to which ethnic Chinese as a former migrant community are broadly understood *members* of the national community.

The case of Chinese Indonesians illustrates legal citizenship without a full sense of membership. Although the citizenship status of Chinese Indonesians was finally settled in 1958, Chinese Indonesians face continuing discrimination. Soeharto’s New Order regime, for example, banned Confucianism, Chinese cultural celebrations, teaching of Mandarin, and Chinese language media. Anti-Chinese sentiments continue to flourish in Indonesia today.⁷ If I am right that populists do not mobilize against migrants and minorities whose status as members of the people had been settled at independence, then the continued questioning of Chinese Indonesians’ status as members of the Indonesian people makes them a plausible target for anti-migrant/anti-minority populist mobilization. This is not true of other migrant communities in Indonesia, such as Arabs, because their membership in the political community has been unquestioned since independence (Pepinsky 2016). It is not true of religious minorities such as Christians or Hindus

⁶ Munro-Kua (1996) uses “authoritarian populism” to describe Malaysian politics in the 1990s. Her use of this term varies from the uses of populism described above.

⁷ An illustrative example is this: ethnic Chinese Indonesians today are sometimes asked to prove that they are Indonesian citizens in encounters with low-level state functionaries.

because their membership too is unquestioned.⁸ It is also not true of ethnic Chinese communities in countries like Thailand or the Philippines, where the membership of ethnic Chinese in broader conceptions of “the people” is relatively unproblematic.⁹

The Rohingya people are an example of a minority community whose citizenship and membership have both long been questioned within the broader Burmese political sphere. Cheeseman (2017) reviews the genealogy of the Burmese term *taingyintha* (“national race”) and its relationship to legal citizenship, membership, and the Rohingya—frequently referred to as “Bengalis.” My argument implies that a populist in Burma could easily mobilize support using anti-Rohingya discourse (Khin 2018) in the same way that Duterte mobilizes support by threatening to murder drug users. The same would not be true of Burma’s dozens of other ethnic minority communities—even those such as the Kachin or Shan who have engaged in open military confrontation with the Burmese state—because these groups have always been understood to be constituent members of the Burmese people.

The previous two examples cover groups whose membership was not set at the onset of mass politics. My last example focuses on new rounds of immigration, and here, the case of Singapore is most instructive (see [Figure 1](#)). Singapore has long identified as a nation of immigrants, but the continued inflow of “foreign talent” affects materials concerns (such as housing prices) and also has raised questions about the integration of foreigners into Singapore’s multiethnic society (Yeoh and Lam 2016).¹⁰ The very success of the Singaporean national project has thus opened a new cleavage in Singaporean politics, not in the “Chinese-Indians-Malays-Others” ethnic framework but between native Singaporeans of any ethnic background and new immigrants. My argument would predict that a populist challenge to the PAP would exploit anti-immigrant sentiments in the name of “the Singaporean people.”

Finally, it is worth considering the implications of my argument about timing of citizenship and the onset of mass politics in the Asian cases for understanding populists elsewhere in the world. If I am correct, then the construction of a French people that unambiguously includes Alsatians, Bretons, and Corsicans should render it impossible for a populist to mobilize exclusionary discourse against these or other groups whose regional identities have been subsumed under the general French identity. However, populists should be able to target those groups whose arrival in France followed the mass acceptance of French peoplehood: Arabs, West Africans, Vietnamese, and others. I suspect that this overstates the case: French populists do not target Italians or Hungarians, for example. One way to refine my argument might be, then, to marry a focus on the timing of peoplehood and the onset of mass politics with popular understandings of the racial foundations of nation and people in Europe, Asia, and around the world.

⁸ A hard test of this argument is what the so-called “Islamic populists” in Indonesia do. My general impression is that Islamic populists invoke a distinct vocabulary (the *umma*, versus the *rakyat*) in order to shift the conceptual framework that their audience employs in imagining “the people.” They also tend not to focus more on “deviationist” interpretations of Islam than on Indonesia’s minority religious communities, and reject the *leadership* but not the *citizenship* or *membership* of Indonesian Christians. See Hadiz (forthcoming) for an interpretation of contemporary Islamic populism in Indonesia which probably disagrees with the rest of this footnote.

⁹ Thaksin Shinawatra is himself ethnic Chinese; Ferdinand Marcos was of mixed Chinese ancestry.

¹⁰ An illustrative example: in 2011 an immigrant family from China complained to the authorities about the smell of curry coming from a neighbor’s flat. This became a hot-button issue in Singaporean politics, with citizens of all backgrounds lamenting the inability of immigrants to adapt to Singaporean cultural (in this case, culinary) norms.

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