

Forum: General Assembly 3

Issue: Addressing the Mistreatment of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

[Religion](#) and [ethnicity](#) are key components of political oppression in southern Asian countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia. Such [minorities](#) are subject to severe political, physical, social, economic and cultural violation of rights within their wider communities and nations. Most of the [discrimination](#) and struggles they face are subtle and half-hidden, ranging from limited access to education to a lack of employment opportunities. This lack opportunities leads to perpetuation of [poverty](#) and the intimidation and violence on the part of non-state actors.

Southeast Asia consists of 11 countries: Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Brunei and Timor-Leste. Even though China isn't a part of Southeast Asia, it still is one of the most relevant countries while discussing the mistreatment of religious and ethnic minorities as they make up one of the largest minorities in the region. The Chinese influx into the region occurred primarily between the 17th to the 20th century across 2 waves caused by the fall of the Ming dynasty in China and the Chinese civil war which resulted in Chinese men moving to the region to work in Tin mines respectively.

The type and magnitude of discrimination faced by ethnic and religious minorities in the region heavily depend on the [homogeneity](#) of the country and past leadership styles. The ways in which these factors influence the type of discrimination is due to countries with a history of [autocratic](#) leadership getting away with more apparent and explicit discrimination in the form of violence, as well as the governments of more homogenous states being able to ignore the well being of minorities with few repercussions as long as they appeal to the majority of citizens.

Over the last few decades, member states across the region have implemented policies to try and limit the discrimination faced by minorities due to ethnic and religious regions. Examples of such laws are the Bumiputera Policies in Malaysia which aimed to create a [middle class](#) of ethnic Malays in Malaysia as well as the CMIO model in Singapore which aimed to limit the discrimination faced by minorities and prioritize the ethnic Malays after the country split from Malaysia.

Definition of Key Terms

Religion

The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.

Ethnicity

The fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition.

Minorities

A small group of people within a community or country, differing from the main population in race, religion, language, or political persuasion.

Poverty

Poverty is a state or condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living.

Discrimination

The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.

Homogeneity

The people all come from a similar ancestry, or there is not a large variety of [cultures](#).

Autocratic governments

A political system in which one person has uncontrolled power and makes all political decisions

Culture

The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society.

Rural

Areas that have low population density and large amounts of undeveloped land

Urban

Areas that have high population density and are surrounding a city

Confucius Centers

Places where the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius are thought.

Citizenship

The relationship between an individual and a state to which the individual owes allegiance and in turn is entitled to its protection.

Traditions

The transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way.

Disaggregated Data

Numeric or non-numerical information that has been collected from multiple sources and has been divided into detail sub-categories.

Non-Government Organization (NGO)

A non-profit organization that operates independently of any government.

Heritage

An expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values.

Middle Class

The social group between the upper and working classes, including professional and businesspeople and their families.

Census

An official survey of the population of a country that is carried out in order to find out details about the population

Key Issues

The extent of Ethnic Diversity in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the world therefore a much larger demographic is impacted by discrimination toward minorities based on their ethnicity and religion. The mindset of the population has changed to the extent that they define countries based on the multiplicity of languages and ethnic cultures that resident them rather than politically determined territorial barriers. A study conducted by new mandala to investigate the relationship between ethnic homogeneity and regime type in Southeast Asia drew 4 primary conclusions based on population statistics from the World Factbook of the United States Central Intelligence Agency, The Polity IV Project, and P4 scores of related countries.

The first result was that the greater the ethnic homogeneity of a country, the lower its level of minority tolerance and openness for policy change. This leads an increase of

mistreatment toward minority groups in relatively homogeneous countries such as Malaysia. An example of such a policy is the Bumiputera policy in Malaysia which prioritizes ethnic Malay resources and benefits such as enrolments in universities over religious and ethnic minorities such as the Chinese.

The Second conclusion was that if a state can focus on appealing to a homogenous population, it can afford to ignore the opinions and interests of minorities with few repercussions. Many countries abuse this fact as it creates a generally good image of the country since most people would only be aware of the opinions of the majority of the population. An example of such instances where this has occurred is Singapore's CMIO model which prioritizes the Chinese majority in policy making over minorities such as the Malays and Indians.

The Third outcome of the study was that countries that have had long histories of autocratic and anocratic governments in the region such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos have significantly higher levels of population homogeneity. This is primarily due to them engaging in explicit violent and exclusionary policies against minorities which result in the extinction in their culture. An example of this is how Myanmar has violently avicted around 700, 000 members of the Rohingya minority since 2015.

The fourth and final conclusion of the study was that less homogeneous states such as Indonesia, and Singapore deploy more institutional exclusion rather than physical violence. Examples of ways in which this occurs is through the deprivation of legal rights and smaller allocations of social welfare. Such countries resort to such means of discrimination as they can't explicitly engage in violence toward minorities as they make up a much larger proportion of their population and therefore cannot be ignored.

Half Hidden and Subtle Discrimination

A lot of the ethnic discrimination toward minorities occur in subtle and half hidden ways. This is extra prevalent in less homogeneous countries such as Singapore and the Philippines as minorities account for a much larger share of the population and therefore people can't get away with treating them violently. Examples of ways in which discrimination occurs subtly are with access to education, and employment opportunities.

It becomes much harder to regulate and judge whether discrimination is a leading factor for the examples given above as there are various other factors that contribute to it. This ultimately leads to people getting away with such discrimination as it is difficult to prove them guilty and it is also much harder for governing bodies to impose laws to limit such things from happening.

The poverty cycle

Ethnic minority groups in Southeast Asia tend to have a higher incidence of poverty when compared to the majority in most countries. They lag behind the ethnic majority in all areas of welfare. The different areas where this welfare gap can be measured are education levels, amount of land owned, income sources, access to electricity, and other economic opportunities.

Household sizes

The fertility rate of ethnic majorities in the region has been consistently lower compared to ethnic minorities. A study conducted in 2012 measured the average fertility rate to be around 2.6 for the Lao-Tai ethnic majority in Laos compared to 4.2 and 5.5 among Mon-Khmer and Hmong-Mien minorities in the region. This results in significantly larger households for minority groups which can lead to many financial constraints. Larger household sizes are made up of more dependents than workers which result in school dropouts due to financial constraints. Early marriages and teenage pregnancies occur consequently which continue to drive up fertility rates. Due to this, fewer household members have at least a secondary education which significantly constrains their economic opportunities, access to markets and electricity, and are more likely to live in remote areas.

Discrimination in Education

Apart from students dropping out due to larger households, ethnic minority groups also face a lot of discrimination in terms of their access to education. This also results in students not continuing with their secondary education which results in them having fewer economic opportunities in the future. This problem will continue unless a change is made to break the cycle.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

China

The Chinese account for a significant proportion of minority groups across Southeast Asia. They are commonly referred to as “Asian Jews” because they have started numerous highly profitable businesses and retained their customs. The economies of many member states such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand are primarily controlled by rich Chinese however many of them live in [rural](#) areas. The vast majority of them live in [urban](#) areas in separate Chinatowns.

Buddhist monks, maritime traders and representatives of the Imperial Chinese government were among the first Chinese to enter the region. In ancient and medieval times, Chinese traders would utilize Southeast Asian ports on the silk road however Arab mariners and merchants usually carried out such trade. It was only after the 13th century when frequent direct trade began between China and Southeast Asian countries. Such trade is the leading factor for Chinese immigration to Southeast Asia.

Since a lot of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia have been very successful, the Chinese government makes attempts and special arrangements for them to invest in the country's economy. A lot of them also frequently visit the country to explore their ancestral villages, network with distant relatives and to relearn the language as well. Since China's

economy has been booming over the last few years, a lot of them also look for investment opportunities during their visits to the country. A new network of "[Confucius Centers](#)" are being established in Southeast Asian countries which focus on teaching Chinese language and culture overseas which reinforces the intention of the ethnic Chinese in the region to stick with and spread their culture.

China has increasingly made use of their ethnic Chinese business and political contacts in Southeast Asian countries to influence political decisions in the country to benefit them. Due to the large ethnic Chinese capital invested in the economies of countries in the region, many governments and individuals in Southeast Asia cannot risk losing ethnic Chinese investors and therefore usually comply with their views and opinions regarding political decisions.

In conclusion, it is very important to China that their people in Southeast Asia are treated equally as they bring a lot of capital into the country and are key contacts when they wish to influence political decisions in such countries. They also feel that their people deserve to be treated equally in the region as they have a long history there and are a pivotal part of the economy.

[Malaysia](#)

Malaysia is a relatively less homogeneous country in southeast Asia with ethnic Malays accounting for just over half the population. The Chinese constitute the country's largest minority group at approximately 24% of the population. Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country therefore a lot of religious tensions arise between different minority groups when they meet. This is predominantly due to beliefs such as that a Muslim marrying a non-Muslim is a rejection of Muslim based nationalist pride.

The vast majority of Chinese in Malaysia are descendants of those who arrived in various waves of immigration and established themselves in cities such as when the British brought them in in the 19th century to work the tin mines and rubber plantations as laborers. Even though most Chinese started off as laborers, they have made their way to being wealthy business owners over generations and now dominate business in the country. Most Chinese in the country are self employed and they together control a large share of the commercial enterprises. A [census](#) conducted in 1970 revealed that approximately 90% of all shops, banks, and factories were owned by ethnic Chinese businessmen.

Ethnic Chinese groups in Malaysia take great pride in their [heritage](#) and therefore send their children to mandarin-language schools and decorate their homes with Buddha statues. They continue with many of their [traditions](#) even though it is not culturally accepted in Malaysia such as eating pork and drinking alcohol. This further creates a social partition between them and the locals which can further be highlighted by the lower number of marriages between them when compared to other southeast Asian countries.

There have been many riots and mass killings throughout the history of the 2 countries. An example was when there were rumors that the Muslim Malays had poisoned pork eaten by the Chinese in 1967 which caused many Chinese men to come down with a mental disease called koro. There was also a riot in 1969 which occurred after a hotly contested general election in which the ruling party lost a lot of seats to the opposition and parties tried to win voters by making racial attacks at one another. Such riots resulted with the formation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) during the 1970s which improved the positions of ethnic Malays by giving them preferential treatment in education, business and governments. It also set quotas that limited the number of Chinese and Indians in universities and public jobs as well as strongly encouraged banks and investment firms for Malays and indigenous people to start businesses. The policy was successful in achieving its goal as over the years, ethnic Malays have taken over many businesses that were previously run by the ethnic Chinese without them being destroyed. Malays also now control the nation's major businesses and there have been relatively few Chinese and Indians who resent the quotas proposed.

Thailand

Even though approximately 95% of the Thai population are ethnically Thai, a lot of discrimination and mistreatment occurs between regional variants in the country. The figure of 95% completely ignores these linguistic differences which also have different cultural beliefs and practices. The Central Thai language is spoken by 34.1% of the population, followed by many regional variants such as Thai Isan, Lao and Kham Mueang Lanna which account for 24.9% and 7.5% of the population respectively. These statistics describe the country to be less homogeneous than it appears even though an overwhelming majority of the country are Thai.

There are also many minority groups in the country which are not ethnic Thai such as the Chinese and Malay Muslims who are the largest official minority group in the country. Even

though they are officially considered a minority group, they still lack political participation which has helped fuel a separatist movement. Smaller ethnic groups including the Akha, Hmong, and Lahu struggle to survive economically and culturally in the face of development projects, land ownership issues, and the influx of ethnic Thais. This contributes to the poverty cycle discussed previously.

Many Thais trace the ancestry of Chinese migrants from the late 19th and early 20th century. It is however extremely difficult to offer a clear population estimate as it was a requirement for the ethnic Chinese to take Thai surnames to obtain [citizenship](#) in the country. There has also been a lot of intermarriage with the existing Thai population which makes it harder to trace back Chinese ancestry however the Thai Chinese currently do not face much ethnic discrimination as a minority group. Most Chinese Thais speak Thai at home which also helps control the balance between Thai and Chinese cultures in the way that they follow many Chinese traditions as well. Similarly to Malaysia, the Chinese own and run majority of commercial and industrial activities however the Thai have been involved and controlled farming. In the 1970s, about 75% of all banks, factories and shops in Bangkok were Chinese owned. In 1995, 11 Thais were listed as dollar billionaires; however all but one of them were Chinese descent. These statistics show how vital the Chinese are to the economy of Thailand and therefore have a lot of political power.

[Vietnam](#)

Vietnam is one of few countries that maintain [disaggregated data](#) based on religion and ethnicity. It collects data based on the 54 officially recognized ethnic minorities. The population is predominantly Vietnamize with 87.5% of the population. Different ethnic groups tend to live in different parts of the countries. An example of this is that the Ethnic Kinh usually live in coastal and low lying areas and most ingenious people inhabit the interior mountains or highlands. This is however changing a lot with the way the country's economy is developing and the change in professions.

The Chinese account for 2% of the population which is quite low when compared to other countries in the region. This is primarily due to many of the ethnic Chinese being forced to leave the country during and after the Vietnam War. Similarly to other countries, the Chinese control a large portion of the commerce in the country. During the 1970s, 70-80% of the commerce industry was run by ethnic Chinese; they only accounted for approximately 5.3% of the

population. It used to be relatively easy for them to acclimatize to the culture as the locals used to speak a language which was somewhat related to Chinese, they used to practice Buddhism, follow Confucianism, and there were many aspects of their culture which were influenced by the Chinese. This led to many Chinese getting intermarried with the Vietnamese and subsequently took Vietnamese names and spoke the language at home.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)

The Asian Human Rights Commission is an [NGO](#) which was founded by a prominent group of jurists and human rights activists in Asia in 1984. It seeks to promote realization and greater awareness of human rights in Asia. The mistreatment of ethnic minorities in southeast Asia is a major human rights issue and therefore this organization is keen to spread awareness. Since a lot of discrimination is done in quite subtle ways many people do not even know it occurs. Spreading awareness about the issue would drastically reduce the extent to which it occurs as people wouldn't be able to get away with it that easily. Due to this, the AHRC has a lot of potential and therefore is working toward the issue.

Development of Issue/Timeline

Date	Event	Outcome
1618-1696	A wave of emigration began, with Chinese settling in parts of what is now Cambodia and peninsular Malaysia as a result of the fall of the Ming dynasty.	This was the start of major Chinese immigration to countries in southeast Asia. Even though they started off as laborers in the region, they overtime became very successful.

<p>1700-1850</p>	<p>Chinese settlers started to become dominant in the commercial sector in Southeast Asia.</p>	<p>Chinese settlers came the Southeast Asia as laborers and were generally not very wealthy. The primary reason they migrated was due to uncertainty in their home country. Them starting to become dominant in the commercial sector was a major event as they now have great political power as they affect a major section of the economy.</p>
<p>April 1927– May 1950</p>	<p>The most recognizable mass movement of Chinese to Southeast Asia occurred as Chinese men were attracted by the prospect to work in tin mines due to shortage of food due to the Chinese civil war</p>	<p>The Chinese immigration to southeast Asia during the Chinese civil war occurred to greater magnitude when compared to other mass migrations. This significantly increased the proportions of Chinese in the region which subsequently significantly</p>

		increased the proportion of businesses owned by ethnic Chinese people
9 August 1965	The CMIO model was implemented in Singapore after the country split from Malaysia.	The CMIO model was implemented to reduce the racial discrimination in terms of the judicial system and ownership of land. It however had many clauses that were designed to benefit the Malays as it was their home country even though the partition took place.
1969	David Astor founded Minority Rights Group International	The Minority Rights Group International is an NGO that has been extremely successful over the last few decades. It has made immense progress in ensuring that minorities and indigenous people have their voices heard.

<p>1970</p>	<p>The Bumiputera Policies were created in Malaysia to create opportunities for Malays or indigenous people in the country in public education and in the public sector.</p>	<p>The Bumiputera policies in Malaysia were implemented with the intention of creating a middle class of ethnic Malays in the country. Before they were implemented a large majority of businesses were run by the ethnic Chinese. These laws were very successful as over the next few decades, many businesses which were run by the Chinese were now being run by ethnic Malays.</p>
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<p>1974</p>	<p>The Minority Rights Groups gains consultative status with the UN</p>	<p>Gaining consultative status with the UN was debatably the most vital factor in the growth of the organization. It granted them credibility and more opportunities for them to ensure that the voices of minorities were heard around the world which would then lead to change.</p>
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<p>1977</p>	<p>The Birth of the first world directory on Minorities</p>	<p>Having a world directory on minorities was a great way of documenting information for scholars. It helped spread awareness about the point of view of minorities across the world.</p>
<p>2008</p>	<p>The Minority Rights Group's World Directory on minorities and indigenous people went digital</p>	<p>The world directory on minorities going digital exponentially increased the reach of the information within it. In the modern world, it more common for students to find information online due to the convenience factor therefore a larger demographic would not only have access to it but would also be more likely to use it.</p>

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The CMIO Model in Singapore

The primary objective of the CMIO model in Singapore was to limit the racial discrimination within the country after it's partition with Malaysia. It was made to protect the

rights and opportunities for the ethnic Malays who were suddenly a minority in their home country. Apart from that it is also used as a dominant framework and model of race in Singapore, therefore discusses a few different areas.

Equal protection of the law for everyone

The CMIO model explicitly describes how there must be no discrimination toward anyone based solely on one's religion, race, descent, or place of birth in any employment, financial, or professional opportunity. This law aims to limit to limit the subtle discrimination that people face. Even though it is not completely successful as it is difficult to prove whether such decisions are made based on such factors, it still stops many people from intentionally discriminating due to the fear of knowing about the consequences they would face if proven guilty.

Religious Groups and Gatherings

The aim of the model was not to completely eliminate ethnic groups therefore it is explicitly stated that the model does not prohibit the practice of employment connected with the affairs of any religion, or of an institution managed by a group professing any religion, to persons professing that religion. The country believes that heritage and ethnicity is important in culture therefore ensures that traditions are not lost with this model and that only discrimination is prohibited.

Constant Care for Minorities

The Singaporean government believes that it is important that they provide constant care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in the country. Without constant support, it would be very challenging for them to get out of the poverty cycle.

Special position for Malays

In order to protect the ethnic Malays, it is stated in the model that the government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognize the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore. It is also stated that it is the government's responsibility to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and culture interests.

In conclusion, the CMIO model in Singapore were successful in protecting the rights of the ethnic Malays in the country as well as creating equal opportunities for all. This success can be seen in a study conducted in January 2019 which revealed that a large majority of people admit that they either never or rarely felt like they have been racially discriminated against at work.

The Bumiputera Policies in Malaysia

The aim of the Bumiputera policies was to create a middle class of ethnic Malays in Malaysia. The government decided that the way to do this was to give more opportunities and support to them rather than to penalize the Chinese in the country who owned most successful businesses. The laws were extremely successful as over the following decades, the Chinese were less predominant in business ownership primarily due to many businesses which were previously owned by the Chinese being owned by the Malays. This was also supplemented by the encouragement of banks to provide loans and capital for ethnic Malays and minorities to start businesses.

Possible Solutions

Social Media Awareness

The impact of social media has recently been made very clear and prominent with the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA. Social media gives people the opportunity to voice their opinions and therefore people hear many different sides of the argument. A major issue is that many minority groups are unable to voice their opinion on social media due to a lack of access and lack of following. NGOs can support such people through targeted advertisements as well as promotion on well known social media pages with a large following.

Encouraging nations to implement laws

The CMIO model in Singapore is a great example of how affective well written laws can be. If similar models that are specifically tailored to countries are implemented, a lot of discrimination and mistreatment will occur due to the fear of sanctions and punishments for individuals and corporations who fail to comply with them. It is however very important that

these laws are detailed and don't have loopholes that can be exploited as it is otherwise not going to be very effective.

Educational Campaigns

Many people outside the region are not aware of the discrimination and mistreatment that occurs in Southeast Asia. If educational campaigns are carried out in countries outside the region, there will be more global coverage about the issue which would result in more awareness and more fear for people who could be found guilty of such discrimination.

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Appendix

- I. Singapore discrimination graph - Perceptions of discrimination in the workplace Singapore 2019 by ethnicity

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1045535/singapore-discrimination-when-at-work-by-ethnicity/>