

Resurgent tides of nationalism

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IN recent months, the rise of nationalism had been associated with the return of xenophobia, anti-immigration, populism and far-right neofascist conservatism.

Nationalism has been much maligned and made the scapegoat for Brexit, for the rise of Donald Trump, for Putinism and China's intransigence on issues like Taiwan.

Putin's expansion towards the East has been construed in certain media circles as a revival of Eurasianism, a policy advocated by Russian thinkers from Prince Nikolay Trubetsky and Lev Gumilev, to Alexander Dugin.

Putin's allusion in a 2012 speech to Gumilev's *passionarnost* (the Russian equivalent of Ibn Khaldun's *asabiyya*) was taken to hint at a revival of Eurasianism.

When Trump assumed office as the president of the United States, China's President Xi Jinping warned the US not to forsake the latter's "One China" policy.

Concomitant with this is the cynicism towards democracy, and the greater call for restraint of popular sentiments through the rule of law.

Democracy, long since promoted as a means of mass empowerment, is now pejoratively viewed as the backdoor to populism.

Stark examples include how referendums — democracy pushed to its furthest frontiers — produced Brexit in the United Kingdom and separatism in Crimea (blamed on so-called "Eurasianism").

Democracy, it is now alleged, gives rise to the tyranny of the majority, or in more fashionable parlance, to "illiberal democracy".

This present and pervasive vilification of nationalism sits rather uneasily with post-colonial societies, whose nation building project is very much a work-in-progress.

Faced with the challenge of managing diverse communities and groups, for decades, nationalism had functioned as a rallying point thought to be able to transcend these differences.

The nation is different from and transcends ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries. Consequently, it is the space in which all communities could converge and share values.

Nationalism functions as a default ideological template, even if unspoken, in many nation-states because it is perceived to be the common basis at which diverse identities could converge.

Nationalism outside Europe emerged as an antidote to sectarianism and parochialism in societies divided by race, ethnicity and religion, while offering a common voice against a colonising power.

Thus, a distinction is commonly made between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism.

Whereas ethnic nationalism is based on a single ethnic group, civic nationalism relies on the construction of a civic identity.

In the Muslim world, nationalism played a key role in the short-lived merger of Egypt and Syria to form the United Arab Republic (UAR) in the late 1950s.

It was also under the nationalist spirit that Arab states during the so-called oil crisis in the 1970s were able, in response to US assistance towards Israel, to launch an oil embargo with a devastating effect on the US economy, compelling the US to realign its policies towards the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

In pre-independence Malaya, the left-leaning intellectual politician Burhanuddin Helmy's nationalist thought censured the French intellectual Ernest Renan's narrow conception of "nation", and embraced instead Otto Bauer's wider conception of nation as "a community of conduct arising from a community of destiny".

Burhanuddin dissociated Malay nationalism from Malay ethnicity, and made the case for diverse ethnic and hereditary communities to be part of the Malay "nation".

He then formulated it in the vein of Mahatma Gandhi (via Sukarno), "I am a nationalist, but my nationalism is humanity".

In China, the Chinese state takes a distinctive attitude towards race and ethnicity, which eminent China scholar Martin Jacques describes as "non-negotiable".

This is the belief in the superiority of the Han Chinese, conceived of as a single race with even distinct biological origins from the rest of humanity.

The non-Han Chinese are even seen as different nationalities altogether.

In Turkey, the Kemalist legacy to create a new civic community based on Turkish identity backfired when the constitution's identification of all citizens as Turks provoked discontent among its minorities, such as the Kurds, who refused to be imposed the Turkish ethnic identity.

The proposed new constitution, as the debate unfolds, seeks to address, among others, this very problem, which the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) had initiated with its "Kurdish opening" much earlier.

Perhaps the bitterest story of nationalist rise is the Buddhist nationalism in Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar, with its antipathy to the Rohingya.

The Myanmar scenario is illustrative of the dangers of state monopoly on the identification of ethnicity. Under the law, only “recognised” ethnic groups can qualify as citizens.

The Rohingya are not recognised as such, but instead, are seen as “Bengalis”, and are subject to numerous discriminations.

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