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Population, Ethnicity and Violent Conflict

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Abstract

Violent conflict is the most visible threat to the achievement of sustainable development in any society. The source of conflict is conventionally the warfare among countries. In the last fifty years, however, the cause for conflict has changed and been mostly related to the process of nation building in the post-colonial states in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the new nations, conflicts on the choice of state's ideology are perhaps the most common, and if unresolved, often lead to the separation or partition of the respected nations. In this case, China vs. Taiwan and India vs. Pakistan are perhaps good examples in history. While ideology plays a critical role, it cannot be isolated from the influence of seemingly non political factors of demography and ethnicity. Majority-minority group conflicts are always related to the demographic composition of the population in which ethnicity, religion and economic classes are politically played out. In the aftermath of the Cold War, ethnic conflicts were unleashed. And they often led to the disintegration of nation-states. The breakdown of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and perhaps Indonesia are illustrative cases. Myron Weiner, Thomas Homer-Dixon and Milica Zarkovic Bookman are among the pioneers in studying the interconnectedness of demography, politics and conflict. Ethno-demographic composition and its influence in the politics of nation building generally has been overlooked in many theories on violent conflicts. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the discourse on the nexus of population and conflict by assessing the existing theoretical knowledge and its empirical evidence from the Southeast Asian region.

Keywords

demography, migration, ethnic conflict, displaced people, nation-state, violent conflicts, population

“As one might expect in a region with deeper sources of political instability and fewer democratic traditions, the ways in which population issues and politics have intersected have been harsher...”

Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay Winter, 1998: 5

Introduction

This is an exploratory paper that aims to search for explanation on the interface of population, ethnicity and violent conflict with reference to the situation in the Asian region—particularly in Southeast Asia. The main issue that will be explored in this paper is by nature located in the intersections among disciplines of demography, anthropology/sociology and politics. Although ethnic related violent conflict has become a major feature of our time, research programs that confront directly the interconnection of population, ethnicity and conflict are still very rare.

More than ten years ago, in 1995, a sociologist, Calvin Goldscheider, edited a book on the linkages between ethnicity and population processes in the context of nation-building. The book ‘Population, Ethnicity and Nation-Building’ featured ethnicity as an important factor in the dynamic of demographic changes and political development. Indeed the mid-1990s culminates the pervasiveness of ethnicity - as shown in the book’s preface:

“Hardly a day passes that issues of ethnic conflict do not appear on the front pages of our newspapers, on the evening news, or in special magazine articles and television programs. Ethnic-based issues have become conspicuous in the revolutions in Eastern Europe and in the collapse of the Soviet Union. They are central to emerging societies, economies, and politics of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. They are continuing features of the politics of race and immigration in Western pluralistic nations decades after assimilation, economic development, discrimination, ethnic identification, and the salience of ethnic communities. Ethnicity, linked to discrimination and racism, remains the source of intergenerational disadvantage and inequality in countries around the world – East, West, and South”.

Since then we have witnessed the flourishing of research studies and publications on ethnic conflicts by different disciplines. Interestingly, studies that focus on the relations of population, ethnicity and conflict are still very limited. The disciplines of demography and population studies seem unmoved by the fact that research on the causes and consequences of ethnic conflict has exploded among various other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Only recently did the members of IUSSP bring the issue of demography and conflict into their professional organization.¹ In the literature the connection between demography and conflict is generally

¹ In June 2002 IUSSP regional conference in Bangkok organized a special panel on migration and conflict. In November 2003 IUSSP organized a workshop and examined particularly at the intersection between demography and conflict research, and posed such questions: What can demographers and conflict researchers learn from one another? What is known about the population dynamics of conflict? Is there a theoretical framework to guide our understanding of the demography of conflict and violence? In relation to ethnicity the workshop aimed to discuss such questions as: What is the role of ethnicity, religion and other group characteristics in the generation of conflict and when do they become a cause of conflict? How do political leaders make use of societal cleavages to spur conflict or war? Under what circumstances can

treated indirectly or only superficially analysed. The provincial attitudes that are still very strong among the different social science disciplines could be the major reason that hinders the development of an interdisciplinary study on this issue. This paper is a modest attempt to fill the research gap and comes in the foot steps of previous pioneering scholars such as Weiner, Homer-Dixon and Bookman that integrate demography into the studies of politics and conflict. The paper starts with a discussion of a theoretical framework that explains the relationship between population dynamics and conflict. This is followed by a more specific examination on the relationship between migration—one of the three main components of population dynamics—and conflict. Utilizing this theoretical framework, the paper then explores the new paradigm of how security threats are being viewed: from the perspective of geopolitics to the perspective of eco-demography. Before closing the paper, with some illustrations from Southeast Asia, the paper examines the role of ethnicity in nation building and the contribution of population dynamics on the impact of ethnicity on nation building.

Framing Population-Conflict Nexus

The interest on the linkage between demographic changes and politics began in 1971 when Myron Weiner explained, in an essay, what he meant by political demography:

“Political demography is the study of the size, composition, and distribution of population in relation to both government and politics. It is concerned with the political consequences of population change, especially the effect of population change on the demands made upon governments, on the performance of governments, and on the distribution of political power. It also considers the political determinants of population change, especially the political causes of the movement of people, the relationship of various population configurations to the structures and functions of government, and the public policy directed at affecting the size, composition, and distribution of populations. Finally, in the study of political demography it is not enough to know the facts and figures of populations – that is the fertility, mortality, and migration rates; it is also necessary to consider the knowledge and attitudes that people have toward population issues.” (Weiner 1971: 567)

While Weiner provides the broad explanation on the relationships between demography and politics, further elaboration is needed to link population and conflict. Conflict is indeed located in a central place in the studies that are concerned with human affairs. Systematic understanding on the relation between conflict and population, however, still needs to be furthered developed. In the early 1980s, in the heyday of population research (a time when the need to control the rapid population increase in the developing world was evident among many but not all scholars), understanding the ramification of population dynamics and conflict at the international level became very important. The apparent communication deadlock between the *pro-natalist* and *anti-natalist* camps in the First World Population Conference in 1974 in Bucharest loomed large and mirrored the conflicting ideologies and divided policy perception on population. Partly in response to the existing global situation, Nazli Choucri, a professor of international politics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, wrote in 1984 on the interconnection of population and conflict. She argued that: “...conflict is a central feature of all political behaviour, at all levels of human interaction, and the prominence of population variables in shaping political behaviour places population issues and conflict in close proximity”. Following Choucri’s argument, we see that the connection between population and conflict is not straightforward but

population policy become an instrument exacerbating or leading to conflict? Among the publication resulted from this workshop see special issue of *Journal of Peace Research*, Volume 42, Number 4, 2005.

through what she referred to as ‘political behaviour’. In a simple proposition, her argument can be shown as follows: *population variables—political behaviour—conflict*.

Population variables, according to Choucri, shape political behaviour and through political behaviour conflict will (or will not) occur. In the field of demography—that studies the human population—population variables are basically related to three ‘vital events’, namely fertility, mortality and migration. Features of population that are related to its size, its growth and its geographic distribution are influenced by the change and the dynamics of its fertility, mortality and migration. While population variables, in the narrow sense, are the field study of demography, in reality they cannot be isolated in a vacuum. Population variables have always been intersected with other social variables, including economy, politics and culture. The complex result forms the social stage upon which human behaviour—including political behaviour—is performed. As Choucri has clearly argued, conflict is the central feature of all political behaviour.

Political behaviour in its narrow sense has become the field of political science. Adrian Leftwich, a lecturer in politics at the University of York, in his book ‘Redefining Politics: People, Resources and Power’, published in 1983, defined politics as the following:

“Politics consists of all the activities of cooperation and conflict, within and between societies, whereby the human species goes about obtaining, using, producing and distributing resources in the course of the production and reproduction of its social and biological life’. He further noted that ‘...these activities are not isolated from other features of social life. They everywhere influence, and are influenced by, the distribution of power and decision making, the systems of social organization, culture and ideology in a society, as well as its relations with the natural environment and other societies. Politics is therefore a defining characteristic of all human groups, and always has been.” (Leftwich 1983: 11)

According to Leftwich, ‘cooperation’ and ‘conflict’ were two main features of political activities (or behaviour) that occurred in a society. It is through cooperation and conflict that human behaviours are basically conducted in every space and arena such as in families, groups of kin or ‘tribes’; in villages, towns, regions, nation-states or associations of them; and, in the modern world, on a global basis. The central point that Leftwich wanted to propose was that the *politics of societies*—including but not exclusively the government—was at every level and in every sphere inextricably involved with how resources were used, produced, organized, distributed and redistributed, and by whom and with what consequences. Resources, according to Leftwich, include capital, land, income, labour and other natural resources. But they also include things such as time, education, status, influence, health and knowledge. Achieving sustainable development, in any society, demands that the process of negotiation between conflict and cooperation remains constant, something that is fundamental to effective politics.

The changing global political context at the end of 1980s and early 1990s, especially after the Cold War was ending up, provided a new situation in which tensions and conflicts were no longer bi-polarized but becoming more diverse. The old-conventional wars had been replaced by what Mary Kaldor termed as ‘the new wars’. According to Kaldor (2001) “new wars” could be distinguished from “old wars” as its goal was the matter of “identity politics” rather than “ideology” and “geopolitics”; involved various type of groups such as paramilitary units, local warlord, criminal gangs rather than hierarchical military units; and most casualties were civilians rather than combatants. The defining politics as put forward by Leftwich needs to be adapted to the current situation whereby identity politics in the context of the ‘new wars’ dominated the world scene as Kaldor has argued. It is therefore very appropriate at this historical juncture to look at ethnicity as is generally understood as the major source of human identity. Ethnicity is

among the main social markers in which cultural boundaries among various groups of people are delineated. Conflict and cooperation, following Leftwich, among different culturally defined groups constitute the identity politics that will be the concern in the discussion on population, ethnicity and conflict.

Migration and Conflict

As briefly mentioned above, at the international level the contentious connections between demography and politics began at the First World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974. The conference, which was initiated by the UN, intended to discuss the increasing pressing issues of world population growth, particularly in the south-poor-developing countries. The rapid rate of population growth in the poor countries was perceived as the world's social-economic problem and a political-security threat, particularly as seen from the rich-industrialised countries. It is very interesting that the delegates at this conference were clearly divided into two camps when they had to discuss the causes and the remedies of rapid population growth. The first camp, mostly dominated by the countries that had links with the socialist-communist bloc, strongly argued that the remedies to the problem ought to be sought by redressing the global order, which tended to benefit the rich countries. On the other hand, the other camp, dominated by Western-liberal countries, argued that birth control on a massive basis should be introduced systematically in order to sustain sufficient economic development growth.²

While the scholarly works on demography are understandably geared towards interpreting the mechanics of population growth, migration and population mobility are generally treated as only marginal factors in relation to population growth. As development approaches focused their attention on the poor-south-developing countries, internal migration—mostly rural to urban migration—received their primary attention in conjunction with economic development.³ Weiner was the only one who gave serious attention to the causal relationships between migration and politics until this theme emerged into the mainstream demographic discourse around the mid 1990s, when ethnic conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia erupted and became everyday television viewing for Western eyes. The attempt to connect migration to politics therefore emerged rather late compared to its connection to economics.

Myron Weiner, a political scientist at MIT—who was also a modernisation theorist—was among the pioneers who looked at the correlation between migration (and demography in general) and political behaviour. His research, based on Indian politics, provided an analysis of how internal migration of a particular ethnic group (the Assamese) created political change in their new place of residence.⁴ As stated above, Weiner was also the political scientist who introduced the term 'political demography' after his involvement with a US funded research team charged with finding a solution to the problem of population growth in the poor developing countries in early 1970s. Weiner has since developed his thinking on international migration and security.⁵ In 1992 he published an article in *International Security* that exposed the perspective of

² Finkle and Crane (1975) provided a comprehensive analysis on the politics of world population conference in Bucharest at the first issue of the new journal published by the Population Council in New York *Population and Development Review*. Since then Finkle regularly provided commentary analysis on the politics of subsequent world population conferences (Mexico City, 1984 and Cairo, 1994).

³ An example of research works on rural-urban migration is a book by Jack Caldwell (1969) *African Rural-Urban Migration: The Movement to Ghana's Towns*. A contending Marxian explanation is given by Samir Amin (1974) in his book *Modern migration in Western Africa' in Modern Migration in Western Africa*.

⁴ Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁵ In 1998 Myron Weiner invited the author to join a workshop at MIT to discuss the broad theme of 'demography and security'. The paper presented at this workshop later published as book in 2001 by Berghahn entitled *Demography and National Security*. The author's chapter in this book shows the security

the security/stability framework (SSF) that he contrasted with the international political economic framework (IPEF) put forward by the economists.

According to Weiner, economists had so far discussed many issues concerning economic differences or inequalities between countries that influenced migration. Political scientists had also discussed conflicts that led to a wave of political refugees leaving a country. However, very few economists focused on how international migration created conflict within or between countries—that is, how to examine international migration as an independent variable, rather than as a dependent variable. According to Weiner, a discussion like this was very important in understanding why a country and its citizens always had a negative attitude towards international migration, even though they were aware of the economic benefits brought about by this kind of migration. Weiner further explained what was meant by SSF, which he carefully differentiated from what had long been known as the international political economic framework (IPEF).

IPEF explained international migration mainly by focusing on the existence of global inequality and economic relationships between the sending and the receiving countries. These relationships include the movement or shift of capital and technology, the role of the transnational institutions, and structural changes in the labour market which are closely related to the international division of labour. SSF focuses on national policies concerning international migration which are created because of concerns about the migration's impact on internal political stability and international security. This means, therefore, that SSF puts considerable emphasis on the understanding of political changes within a country as the main determinant of international and internal migration, including the wave of refugees both as a cause and an effect of international conflicts.

IPEF and SSF, however, have obvious similarities. Both have shifted from approaches which up until now have maintained that migration is a result of individual decision making to approaches which look at migration in the context of wider social, political and economic changes. Both use an interactive framework that emphasizes the relationship between the processes of migration on the one hand and the process of global change on the other. Both pay attention to the behaviour of a country and the importance of its national borders. Compared with IPEF, SSF emphasizes the importance of decisions taken by a country, whereas the role of a country is always treated lightly by IPEF, which is more likely to consider the global strength as the main determinant. Both concepts also present different arguments about aspects of international migration. They raise different questions, they advance different explanations about international mobility and they provide different concepts of analysis. Although both reinforce or supplement each other, the lines of argument advanced are seldom the same. IPEF for example, may use an analysis that looks at population mobility from a poor to a rich country as something of mutual benefit (the poor benefit from remittances whereas the rich benefit from cheap labour which it requires).

SSF, on the other hand, may see the same population mobility as causing a political consequence, namely changes in ethnic composition in the receiving country, which result in friction in the relationship between the two countries as a consequence of the conflict between migrants and the local communities. In another example, the IPEF approach can lead to a conclusion that migration leads to a brain drain from the sending country and worsens the unemployment and housing problems in the receiving country. Conversely SSF looks at population migration as something that can improve the internal security of a country and international peace because migrants from ethnic minorities who are not socially accepted in their countries of origin can be accepted in the countries to where they migrate. A cost-benefit analysis can therefore lead to a different evaluation and policies depending on the framework applied.

According to the analysis that was expounded based on IPEF, international migration often connotes two very important political elements. First, international migration usually occurs

aspects of transmigration policy in Indonesia (Tirtosudarmo, 2001). More expanded discussion on migration, development and security see also Tirtosudarmo (2005b).

because it is supported or discouraged by governments due to reasons that do not have any economic relationship at all to migration. For example, according to Weiner, the international migration that took place in Africa and South Asia had little or completely no relationship with global changes or political-economic changes in the two regions. Secondly, if economic factors are the cause of population migration, it is the governments which determine whether these people should be allowed to leave their country of origin, while the receiving countries ultimately decide whether to accept or reject these migrants. Government policy is not always based on economic considerations. Furthermore, there are variations in governments' ability to control migrants entering their countries. A country may be able to use military power to defend itself from foreign aggression but may not have the power to defend itself from migrants entering the country illegally looking for job opportunities. A country which endeavours to control the entrance of illegal migrants may not have the ability to stop them, but may consider it as a threat to its sovereignty. For this reason, therefore, an understanding of the political dimensions of international migration is vital and crucial in analysing the phenomenon of international migration.

From Geopolitics to Eco-Demographic Security Threats

In the last three decades studies of the impact of immigration flows coming from the poor-southern countries into the north-rich countries have flourished. These studies, eventually published as books, reports and journal articles, reflect the increasing tensions felt by governments and societies in rich countries on the likely negative impacts of immigration. The motivations of people who move to the rich countries vary but they are generally prompted by economically related causes. Economic difficulties that are increasingly felt at home and the availability of migration channels already established among peoples from the former European colonies provide the impetus for migration chains between countries of origin and destination. In this period, studies that dealt with cultural implications began to emerge, in addition to those that concerned the more conventional economic and political implications of immigration. In this academic-policy environment, immigration is still generally not perceived as a security issue. The perception that migration—particularly immigration to Western European and Nordic countries—contains a security threat was only developed after the tragic events in Bosnia and Kosovo where violent ethnic conflicts between Muslim and Christians erupted in early 1990s. The people in the north-rich countries started perceiving that conflict in poor countries might affect their sovereignty. The conflict in Rwanda between the Tutsis and Hutus⁶ was another event that sharpened this perception. As a result of these and other conflicts, studies on communal and ethnic conflicts in various forms began to flourish.⁷ These studies also show departure from, and the abandonment of, the formerly dominant modernization and development perspectives.

The promise of modernization and development theories that societies would move towards modernity and leave their primordial sentiments behind and shift towards more class-based societies have been shown to be generally unproven. The apparently pervasive role of ethnicity in many societies undergoing economic development shows the fundamental flaws of modernization and development paradigms. Among the most influential recent works that sought to explain conflict and population related issues are the research published by Thomas Homer-Dixon, a political scientist based at the University of Toronto (working closely with his former MIT colleagues in Boston), and the work of Robert Kaplan, a prolific journalist who works for the

⁶ Mahmud Mamdani (2001) argued that the long historical processes of ethnic construction under European colonialism played a crucial role in the development of tensions and conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis

⁷ See among others, studies by Gurr (1993, 2000) and Varsney (2003)

Atlantic Monthly in New York.⁸ In his enormously influential essay, “The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation, and Disease are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of Our Planet” Kaplan “conjured up a surreal picture of an African continent in the throes of an apocalyptic crisis: overpopulated, undernourished, and driven to barbaric acts of violence by irrational spirit power”. While Homer-Dixon represented the new voice of academia that mirrored the emerging neo-Malthusian perspectives, Robert Kaplan’s absorbing talent brought the horror of environmental problems caused by overpopulation in poor developing countries into the mind of people in the western-rich countries.

Homer-Dixon was invited to give a presentation on his population and conflict theory at the experts meeting preceding the World Population Conference in Cairo in 1994, whose proceedings were later developed into a book entitled ‘*Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*’.⁹ According to Homer-Dixon, as well as Robert Kaplan in more popular language, poverty in the developing worlds is still basically the root cause of political conflict. Both Homer-Dixon and Robert Kaplan strongly argued that the uncontrolled population growth in the poor-southern countries would eventually encroach into the surrounding environments. In the process of population encroachment into their surrounding environments, conflict over scarce resources (and anarchy—the term used by Robert Kaplan) becomes inevitable and constitutes the major security threat and the order of the day. Interestingly, Homer-Dixon’s theory on population and conflict reflected the popular perception and concern of the people in the north-rich countries on the ramification of unchecked population growth in the south-poor countries, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The contention on population issues was previously constructed within the context of a bipolarised world and the Cold War in which conflict was perceived as part of the geopolitical tensions between different ideological camps. However, since early 1990s, the issue has shifted into a new centre of gravity, that the eco-demographic security has been perceived as a new threat coming from the poor-south countries.

The spectre of conflict emanating from demographic changes, as clearly theorized by Homer-Dixon, is no longer associated with the world ideology and geopolitics but with the issue of environment and resource scarcities. In other words, both Homer-Dixon and Robert Kaplan have shifted the discourse on global security threats from the conventional political issues that concerned state sovereignty and traditional warfare into more fluid and disguised eco-demographic interconnected security threats. The implication for foreign policy, however, is clear, as articulated by Kaplan¹⁰ “surging populations, spreading disease, deforestation and soil erosion, water depletion, air pollution, and possibly rising sea levels... - developments that will prompt mass migration and in turn incite group conflicts”. In a different vein, Homer-Dixon, for example, strongly noted that, “...my key finding is straightforward: ...scarcity of renewable resources – what I call environmental scarcity – can contribute to civil violence, including insurgencies and ethnic clashes...In the coming decades the incidence of such violence will increase”.¹¹

According to Homer-Dixon, environmental scarcity has three causal forms, namely degradation (supply induced), increased demand (demand induced), or unequal resource distribution. The presence of any of these “can contribute to civil violence” through “resource capture” (generally

⁸ Robert Kaplan has traveled extensively in many ‘trouble places’ in the ‘third world’. His famous article, ‘The Coming Anarchy’, appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1994. Several books published by Kaplan focus on the contagious effects of deteriorating social fabrics in the third world, which he argued ought to sound the alarm for the western-rich countries, prompting them to take more serious action.

⁹ Among the contending views on both Homer-Dixon and Kaplan’s arguments that relate population-environmental variables and violence and conflicts is a book *Violent Environment*, edited by Michael Watts and Nancy Pelluso (2001).

¹⁰ Quoted from Pelluso and Watts (2001:3).

¹¹ Homer-Dixon (1999:177).

by “elites”) and/or “ecological marginalisation” of vulnerable disenfranchised people. Ecological marginalisation is often a result of resource capture. Population growth in this equation appears centrally as the driving force in all of these causal claims.

Environmental scarcity that originates from the dynamics of eco-demographic interactions constitutes the main source of what Homer-Dixon defined as environmental security (ES). In this regard, as clearly pointed out by his critics, Homer-Dixon treated environment-conflict linkages as automatic and simplified the complex interconnection of “increased environmental scarcity”, “decreased economic activity” and “migration” that purportedly “weaken states” and cause “conflict and violence”. Peluso and Watts (2001) in their edited book *Violent Environments*, strongly argued that violence as a site-specific phenomenon ought to be seen as deeply rooted in the society’s local histories and social relations that cannot be isolated from its larger processes of material transformation and power relations. Peluso and Watts’ main point was the entitlements by which differentiated individuals, households, and communities’ possessed or gained access to resources within a structural political economy. It grants priority to how these entitlements are distributed, reproduced, and fought over in the course of shaping, and being shaped by, patterns of accumulation. Conditions of resource scarcity do not, contrary to the claims of Homer-Dixon and others, have a monopoly on violence. In Peluso and Watts’ view, abundance and processes of environmental rehabilitation or amelioration, rather than simply shortage, are most often associated with violence.

Ethnicity and Nation-State Building

Ethnicity is generally defined as a sense of group belonging, based on ideas of common origins, history, culture, experience and values. An ethnic group is a group with a common ethnic identity or ethnic consciousness. Among social scientists that study ethnicity the notion of ethnic identity is usually perceived in two different views: the so-called primordialist and the constructivist. While the primordialist perceived ethnicity as a natural result of biological differences, the constructivist, on the other hand, argued that ethnicity was constructed and reconstructed by social groups. Ethnicity is changeable and modified in response to external pressures. The primordialist argued that each group had a unique and fixed ethnic identity and it normally resided in its own territory. On the ethnic boundary, Fredrik Barth (1969) noted that,

“It is important to recognize that although ethnic categories take cultural differences into account, we can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features that are taken into account are not the sum of “objective” differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant. Not only do ecologic variations mark and exaggerate differences; some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied.”¹²

The importance of actors in manipulating cultural features in defining what constitutes ethnic identities is emphasized in this concept. Ethnic identity in turn plays a crucial role in dividing the population in a particular country into culturally different groups. There is almost no country in which its citizens belong to a single ethnic group. Most countries are multi-ethnic although in many cases there are one or more ethnic groups that are demographically dominant. While the difference in population size is crucial in determining the power relation among various ethnic groups, population size alone will not have any significant impact on the power relationship among ethnic groups. In this regard the processes of nation formation and state building in

¹² See Frederick Barth (1969), “Introduction”, p. 14.

communities of colonies in Asia provide good examples in the interplay of ethnic group identities and other aspects of the society.

The process of nation building in many post-colonial states in Asia is therefore always related to the problem of maintaining sustainable development in multi-ethnic societies. Ethnic pluralism is a social reality inherited from past history but also continues to be part of the making of current and future societies in this region. As Esman clearly explained in his book *Ethnic Politics* (1994), ethnic pluralism can be traced to three factors. The first is conquest and annexation, when people are defeated and brought under the rule of the victor. Soviet-Russia is perhaps the best example of this first type. The second is the process of European colonisation and decolonisation, which assembled and established administrative boundaries for the convenience of colonial powers. People who had no mutual affinity were often split into two or more states governed by different colonial masters. Most states in Southeast Asia are under this second type. The third main contributor to ethnic pluralism is population movement as people have crossed political boundaries in search of economic opportunity or religious and political freedoms. This third type of ethnic pluralism might be a very common social phenomenon in most countries as movement of people, either for work or for refuge, increased rapidly in conjunction with the vast process of globalisation and international labour migration.

The political circumstance of nation-state building in the post colonial states, however, is very problematic. Esman (2004) argued that "...as the duty of state elites was to build a united and homogenous nation, the duty of ethnic minorities was to assimilate; the only acceptable alternative to assimilation was passivity". Yet, some cases in Asian states show that minority groups were not passive participants in the process of nation-state building, contrary to the Esman's observation. Majority-minority ethnic group relationships constantly haunted post-colonial states in Asia. More often than not, the ethnic-based conflicts that have broken out in the Asian region are minority group responses to the imposing centralistic and hegemonic policies from the major ethnic groups. Recent ethnic tensions that in some cases have erupted into violent conflicts in Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, Indonesia, the Philippine and Papua New Guinea have generally been associated with the majority-minority ethnic group relations.¹³ Ethnic conflict, therefore, always entails counting the size of groups whose growth rates are low or negative and who are threatened by assimilation. These groups, feeling besieged, respond by cultivating a collective consciousness and this frequently includes *pro-natalist* campaigns—non-violent conflicts fought over the long term. This kind of demographic ethnic conflict—a culture war about numbers—harms no one, but as soon as cynical politicians and their followers try to take a shortcut and redress the imbalance by forcible eviction of another ethnic group, the demographic condition becomes lethal.

Bookman (1997), in *The Demographic Struggle for Power*, was perhaps the first in locating demographic variables as major determinants in power politics. Bookman showed the importance of group size and how states engineered demographic conditions for their economic and political interests. The term "demographic engineering" was introduced to explain the intricacies of demographic factors within national policies.¹⁴ According to Bookman, group size was important because size translated into greater political power within a multi-ethnic state, and group size could give legitimacy to demands for political autonomy and ultimately the creation of secessionist ethno-states. Greater group size also facilitates resource competition within multi-ethnic states, at least partly because of increased ability to manipulate the political process. Multi-ethnic states tend to become arrayed as competing groups battling over scarce resources, and it is rare for different ethnic groups to have the same size and control of resources at any given time. Although there is a correlation between group size and economic and political power, there are glaring exceptions to this rule, the most common being the exploitation of larger groups by

¹³ See comparative studies by Gurr on the contentious politics of minority groups and the state (1993, 2000)

¹⁴ On this issue of demographic engineering as a technique of conflict regulation see also McGarry (1998)

smaller groups with greater access to the forces of social control. Bookman also noted that particular groups, such as overseas Chinese living in Southeast Asia and the Jews, had often been exceptions to the general pattern, at times showing disparities between economic and political power and often obtaining high levels of economic or political power despite a small group size.

Nation-state building and modernization bring with them increased ethnic conflict as different groups begin competing in larger economic and political systems in which, at any given point in time, groups differ in their numbers and their control of resources. In such a new political circumstance people are forced into new social relationships and the logical place to begin to look for such relationships is to identify oneself as a member of a larger something based on those attributes that one carries around with oneself, namely one's language, historical place, race, and religion. Ethnicity, in the broader sense, becomes very important cultural marker that is played out within the context of power relations and the new politics of identity. This tendency may be exacerbated by elites who utilize these tendencies to satisfy their own individual interests that may or may not coincide with the interests of the group as a whole. In this complex situation, the demography of ethnicity is easily manipulated to serve the political and economic interests of powerful elites.

Southeast Asia: The Spectre of Conflict and Displaced Population¹⁵

The nation-states in Southeast Asia emerged from a combination of nationalistic movements and the negotiation among former colonial powers that were strongly influenced by the United States (the major super power after the Pacific War). Following the contestation between the super powers during the Cold War, the Vietnam War was perhaps the first major cause of forced population displacement in Southeast Asia in which many Vietnamese decided to leave their countries to seek refugees in other countries. The forced migration event that is epitomized by the so called 'boat people' can be seen as the beginning of the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia. The flows of Vietnamese refugees into their neighbouring Southeast Asian countries provoked the international agencies and western countries to deal with this major humanitarian issue. Again, the north-rich countries played a major role in solving the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia, resembling the experience of solving the displaced population in Europe after World War II. While the experience of Vietnamese boat people shows the critical role of the west in solving the Vietnamese refugee in Malaysia and Indonesia by assisting the refugees to resettle in the western countries (USA, Canada, Australia); the Vietnamese, the Cambodian and the Laotian that were displaced and taking refugees in the Thai borders remain unresolved until today. These displaced populations are almost unprotected by any states and are very vulnerable to various external threats and manipulation. Human trafficking is one of the major problems these displaced people are experiencing. Forced migration is clearly constantly lingering in the life of the people that taking refugee in the Thai-Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos border regions.¹⁶

While Thailand seems to enjoy being a nation-state that has never experienced western colonialism, its east and northern border regions have become the sanctuary of people that have fled from persecution—most notably from Burma. The unresolved internal political problems stemming from the unsettled nation building process in Burma have become the source of protracted conflict between the military junta and the opposition group led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the secessionist minority ethnic groups basing their arms struggle in the border areas with Thailand. At present thousands of displaced people residing in the Thai-Burma border areas, most

¹⁵ The discussion on this section is partly drawn from my other recent paper on the issue of refugee and displaced people in Southeast Asia (Tirtosudarmo, 2006) and my introductory chapter at the special issue on Forced Migration in Southeast Asia at *Asian Pacific Migration Journal*, 2006.

¹⁶ See Anh (2004, 2006)

notably the Karen, are constantly calling out for humanitarian assistance and a political solution.¹⁷ The Muslim Rohingas also escaped from political persecution in Burma and took refuge in Malaysia. The Malaysian government seems more tolerant toward Muslim refugees, especially the Rohingas, and to a lesser extent the Acehnese and Patanis. The unfinished project of nation building in the post-colonial states of Southeast Asia has also flared up in the Southern Philippines (in the Mindanao islands), Indonesia's West Papua and Aceh, and recently in southern Thailand.¹⁸ Conflict and political upheaval following the independence and separation of East Timor from Indonesia in 1999 were also marked by a major dislocation of people. Thousands of former East Timorese were forced to leave East Timor and cross the border to Atambua in West Timor, Indonesia. The East Timorese displaced population was caught in the middle of two nationalities as East Timor is no longer part of the Republic of Indonesia. Their demographic status posed legal problems as they could be either IDPs or refugees.¹⁹

These conflict hot spots have produced both refugees and internally displaced populations that strongly reflect the failure of Southeast Asian states to effectively deal with their own domestic politics and inter-state issues, especially with regard to the problem of cross border forced population movement.²⁰ Southeast Asian state's border areas now represent a spectre of forced population displacement arenas in which various refugee related issues, such as the stateless, citizenships, human trafficking and identity politics are calling for better rigorous academic understanding and viable policy actions.²¹ While the pressing needs of the displaced people (e.g., safety, shelter, food, medicine, clothing, etc.) must be given immediate priority, there are several more fundamental matters that must be given serious attention by scholars and practitioners, especially if the goal is to secure a long term and viable solution to the problem of displaced

¹⁷ On the displaced population in the Thai-Burma borders see intriguing paper 'The Silence and Violence of Forced Migration: The Myanmar-Thailand Border' in Grundy-Warr (2004)

¹⁸ On the political demography of nation-state building in Indonesia, see a chapter on demography and conflict by Tirtosudarmo (2005a).

¹⁹ On the East Timorese displaced people see various publications by JRS and Human Right Watch.

²⁰ The discourse on the so-called 'internally displaced population' in the region is relatively new. In Indonesian and Philippine language, for examples, the term that is used is '*pengungsi*' (Indonesia) and '*bakwit*' (Philippine) or 'refugee' if we translate into English language. While in the international communities the term refugee constitutes a totally different meaning with 'internally displaced population', in Indonesian context it is used interchangeably. 'Pengungsi' is a very common usage in Indonesia, meaning people that are taking refugee in a (temporary) safe place as they were forced to move from their usual residence. The reasons for their move ranged from natural disasters (earthquake, eruption of the mountain) or man made disasters (flooding, development projects, local government's eviction from public areas, communal conflicts, and war). The forcefulness of circumstances that instigate the movement constitutes the main characteristic of the 'pengungsi' phenomena. Seen from this broader understanding of causes of the movement, the so-called 'internally displaced population' could be something that is nothing new in Indonesia (before and after independence). On the historical perspective of forced migration in Indonesia, see Hugo (2006).

²¹ Since then IDPs had been quickly entered into public discourses, various institutions, both foreign and locals, began to follow the UN steps in 'capitalizing' the plight of 'displaced people' that flourished as communal conflicts became one facet in the wider canvas of political changes in the region. The displaced population – in terms of their label category - reflects the process of forced geographic movement. The critical feature in this event however is the process of how human beings are compelled to be dispossessed – of their material as well as social and cultural belongings. The dispossession process is in fact the crux of the matter of any forms of forced displacement. The latest incidence in mid January 2006 concerning the arrival of 43 peoples (36 adults and 7 childrens) of West Papuans by boat in Far North Queensland seeking asylum in Australia is case in point. As the signatory of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, Australia is obliged to process the future refugee status of these people. The case however will likely to be handled by the Australian very carefully to avoid the irritating reaction from the Indonesian government.

populations in the region. The forcefulness of circumstances that produce displaced populations should be seen as part of a longer process of yet unfinished and perhaps failed nation-state building whereby some groups of people are firstly being dispossessed and secondly being displaced. As the displaced constitute a dispossessed group of dispossessed people, the more fundamental issue is related to the need to recover what they have lost: their political rights, their property rights and their cultural rights.

When looked at from a broader perspective that includes the displaced people's rights as citizens, what we should see is an approach that can genuinely provide room to convey the creation of these displaced people's own perspectives. In order to facilitate the creation of such a perspective the discourse on refugee and displaced people in Southeast Asian region should be critically assessed and shifted from the current heavily adopted programmatic approaches. As Nordstrom and Martin (1992: 15) correctly noted, 'social scientists, no matter what their field of study, will in all likelihood confront some instance of socio-political violence in the field' and they need 'viable field methodologies and theoretical frameworks' if they are to understand the processes that involve them as possible victims as well as observers.

Given the increasingly important interconnections that transcend state's boundaries, a more holistic approach is needed in situating Southeast Asia into an integrated space rather than separating it into different entities. As Wang (2001) makes clear, such a vision is not new:

“With very few exceptions, the scholars avoided portraying the local reality as integral parts of the unique border-less maritime world of the Malay Archipelago. In that world, people were mobile and migratory to a greater extent than we realized. It was a world of commerce, including trade over long distances. The trade was not only among the Malays themselves, but one that, continuously and for centuries, attracted maritime neighbouring peoples from the west and the north, including those from mainland Asia.”

Wang certainly is not alone in longing for new light to be shed on studies of this region. As Anderson (1998: 7), from a different angle, has argued, no other region of the world—not Latin America, not the Near East, not Africa, and not South Asia—has had such an alarming profile as the region, and it will always be an arena for global powers and their interests.²²

Concluding Remarks

Demography and population studies lag behind other social science and humanities disciplines in responding to the call for studying the emerging issues of ethnicity and conflict. The initiatives currently taking place among the experts and organizations such as IUSSP in looking into the question of ethnicity and conflict should be strengthened and expanded. Ethnicity is likely to become an increasingly important factor in human affairs as movement of people becomes the main feature of the current global transformation. In such a fluid global dynamic, old and conventional ideological tensions will be replaced by a new and more subtle politics of identity in which cultural markers such as ethnicity, religion and race will become major influential factors in human affairs. The ethnic diversity of the population in every country in Southeast Asia will always challenge respective states to strike a balance among different groups. In this context, demographic change resulting from fertility differentials between ethnic or racial groups could have serious long term and political ramifications in the countries like Singapore and Malaysia. While the natural increase will have a long term and indirect impact, migration will have a more immediate and direct impact on the racial and ethnic composition of countries in the region.

In the near future, the significant contribution of demography and population study on its ability to dissect society based on its composition and distribution of culturally defined groups will be

²² On the impact of major global powers in Southeast Asia's displaced population see Hedman (2006).

instrumental in any attempt to create sustainable development. The Asian region—Southeast Asia in particular—is an excellent place to study relationships among population, ethnicity and conflict. Cross border movement has strongly influenced the region. As a result, the region has become an arena of negotiation between culturally different groups of people. The region will continue to be influenced by economic and political global powers and interests. The nation-states in the region will continue to be the locus of contention between various global powers and ethno-nationalist (as well as indigenous people movements). As the main feature of politics, group interaction—conflict or cooperation—becomes the norm and value of the Asian region. Movement of people between regions provides the social space where different values and norms are confronted. This creates new social hybrids that make the region culturally rich and politically dynamic.

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