Democracy and Nationalism in Southeast Asia: From Secessionist Mobilization to Conflict Resolution

Jacques Bertrand, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 282.

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In *Democracy and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, Jacques Bertrand asks whether democracy is more effective than authoritarianism in solving ethno-nationalist insurgencies. He answers affirmatively but with many qualifiers. The main claim that Bertrand makes is that during transitions to democracy there may be an increase in violence due to ethno-nationalist mobilization, but as democracies become more stable, this violence declines. Yet, even a stable democracy does not fully extinguish the flames of ethno-nationalist crises. Bertrand writes: “The democratic context multiplies the available options and, more importantly, increases the state’s accountability. But the democratic context does not necessarily resolve conflict” (p. 3). (Bertrand uses the term “nationalism,” but to emphasize that we are discussing groups advocating for a separate territory within a wider unit, I will use the term “ethno-nationalism.”)

The book provides evidence for this theoretical argument through five case studies of ethno-nationalist mobilization in Southeast Asia: the Acehnese in western Indonesia; the Papuans in eastern Indonesia; the Malay Muslims in southern Thailand; the Moros of southern Philippines; and the Cordillerans in northern Philippines. All five of these groups have made strong claims for autonomy, secession or recognition. However, the outcomes of these claims have varied significantly. The case that has gained the most autonomy is that of Aceh. The one that has gained the least from its struggles with the state are the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand. Somewhere in between lie the three other cases.

Democracy and Nationalism in Southeast Asia stands out in its effort to compare across five cases in a world region characterized by a wide diversity of institutions and actors. Bertrand has done extensive fieldwork throughout the five areas he has studied. The range of actors he has interviewed—members of parliament, local state officials, government negotiators, priests, rebel commanders and human rights activists—is indicative of the breadth of information he has gathered in developing his argument. This kind of fieldwork, especially in conflict-ridden areas, is not easy and requires persistence and creativity.

In its concern with mid-level generalization that links the five cases, the book begins with a generalizable framework: that democracy in the long run tends to reduce ethno-nationalist violence—both from the state and from the insurgent actor. Notably, Bertrand argues against a simple inverted-U curve in positing his theoretical framework. Instead, he makes the case for a bell curve hypothesis. The difference lies in the fact that the bell curve captures better the progression of violence in these kinds of insurgencies: a gradual rise, a gradual decline, and no abrupt ending. In fact, throughout the book Bertrand emphasizes that even under a stable democracy, conflict and violence may persist in slow burn.

But below this bell curve hypothesis, the book provides many qualifiers in order to account for the varying trajectories of the cases that Bertrand examines. Five variables are emphasized. The first is the ethno-nationalist groups’ mobilizational capacity. Second, concessions from the state are important in reducing violence from the ethno-nationalist group. Third, electoral coalitions help to mitigate violence. Fourth, presidential systems with highly independent parliaments are less likely to reduce violence because of a desire not to concede to the insurgent group. Fifth, credible commitments play a key role in getting the ethno-nationalists to trust in the government. Democracies tend to be better systems in which credible commitments can be generated.

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These variables are all relevant in trying to understand how nationalist violence can subside in each case. However, the problem with a framework that incorporates so many variables is that it is hard to understand how we should pull them together in a tight, parsimonious way. Empirically, Bertrand is surely correct in putting forth these variables as worthy of consideration. Yet, analytically, these variables appear quite disparate and need some significant tightening in terms of their relationship to each other and in terms of which ones to prioritize when trying to map out causality. One gets the sense that mobilizational capacity is a significant variable—helping to draw out sharp contrasts between the two poles: the outcomes of Aceh and that of the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand. Its interaction with democratic institutions ultimately shapes the varying outcomes. Yet the fact that democratic institutions are broken down into many variables through which they interact with mobilizational capacity makes it difficult to grasp whether there is a common cause-and-effect pattern across the cases.

That said, this book demonstrates a serious effort to puzzle through an important political and policy problem. In doing so, it has made a solid contribution to the literature on ethnonationalist conflict in Southeast Asia. Scholars, students, policy analysts and laypersons concerned about the contemporary dynamics of secessionist conflict in the region will all profit from reading *Democracy and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*.

Fiscal Choices: Canada After the Pandemic

Michael M. Atkinson and Haizhen Mou. eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 275

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When the COVID-19 crisis struck, and governments around the world began responding with unprecedented levels of income support, many felt we were on the verge of a fiscal revolution (Blanchard *et al.*, 2021). While it was always understood that most of the COVID spending was temporary, many economists also saw considerable scope for deficits beyond the pandemic. The assumption—widely held by central banks and even within the IMF (Gopinath 2020)— was that the advanced economies were at risk of secular stagnation, that the COVID shock would depress aggregate demand even further, and that only fiscal authorities could return the economy to full potential with interest rates at or near their zero-lower bounds. Five years on, it is safe to say enthusiasm for deficits among mainstream economists has waned, while the long-term path of aggregate demand—and its implications for fiscal policy—has become anybody's guess (and that is what I wrote before the re-election of Donald Trump).

It is in this moment of great uncertainty that Michael Atkinson and Haizhen Mou have published *Fiscal Choices: Canada After the Pandemic*—a broad and comparative overview of Canada's fiscal challenges in the wake of the pandemic and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The book explores a range of economic and fiscal challenges, including economic stability and growth (chapter 3), income and wealth inequality (chapter 4), fiscal sustainability (chapter 5), fiscal federalism (chapter 6) and democratic accountability (chapter 7). It also describes the perspectives of Canada's economic elite on these issues—drawing not only on recent academic and policy debates but also interviews with 24 public economists and 47 sitting or retired politicians and bureaucrats.

The book's main conclusions, as I see them, are four. First, Canada and other wealthy democracies face a polycrisis. Growth is stagnant. Goods and services have become more

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