

***Identity Politics and Elections in Malaysia and Indonesia: Ethnic Engineering in Borneo.* By Karolina Prasad. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2016. Hardcover: 215pp.**

In this book, Karolina Prasad attempts to study how institutions, particularly political parties, play a role in changing ethnic identities in consociational and centripetal polities. In the context of Southeast Asian politics, studies on the role of ethnicity in electoral politics are numerous. In Malaysia, for instance, scholars have often tried to identify the link between voters' ethnic identity and their political choices. The usual method to explore this link is to examine voters' voting preferences towards candidates and political parties that have strong ethnic appeals. For instance, the bulk of support for the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) comes primarily from Malays, while support for the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) comes from the Chinese and Indian electorates respectively.

In the eastern Malaysian provinces of Sabah and Sarawak, most, if not all, of the political parties depend heavily on the support of particular ethnic groups. The second largest party in Sabah, the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), is primarily a Kadazandusun-based party even though it claims to represent the wider interests of Sabah's culturally diverse society. In Sarawak, key parties such as the Parti Pesaka Bersatu (PBB), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS) and the Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP) all operate based on certain ethnic appeals. In this context, Prasad's main contribution to the research on ethnic politics is that she explores how ethnic identity (or identities or ethnic categories) is "activated" in different political settings. The author looks at this "ethnic identity activation" (pp. 144–92) by assessing how political actors and institutions maximize their ethnic electoral support over time, and across different geographical areas.

Scholars often take the primordial approach to understanding the role of ethnicity in electoral politics. While one cannot totally discount the power of primordial sentiment in influencing political choices, Prasad proposes a more nuanced approach to exploring the role of political institutions in changing ethnic identities, primarily in societies divided by ethnic and religious differences. By comparing Sarawak and West Kalimantan, the author manages to elucidate the point that the nature and processes of ethnic identity vary from one

polity to another. The author notes that in Sarawak ethnic identity change is much more explicit, and the role of institutions more direct. The Sarawak case also shows that the role of the federal government is also significant in the activation of ethnic categories. A case in point is the Malay-Muslim-dominated federal government which works closely with Malay-Melanau state local leaders to strengthen and spearhead Malay-Muslim interests in Sarawak. The case of West Kalimantan is slightly more subtle, as political actors cannot rely on the support of particular ethnic groups alone and because of the centripetal nature of the West Kalimantan political setting which seeks to build support that cuts across ethnic lines.

In Sarawak, it is easier to trace ethnic identity change over time as it holds only two elections: state and national. As elite ethnic bargaining is an important component in Malaysia's consociational democracy, it is not difficult to see which ethnic category is "activated" more prominently than the others. In West Kalimantan, tracing ethnic identity change is a much more daunting task because it holds multiple elections to elect officials to its three tiers of administration. In terms of theory building, the book is an important text for scholars and students of ethnic politics who want to further explore ethnic politics in different political settings. As the author rightly notes, it is important for scholars to study "politics' impact on ethnicity, and not as ethnicity's impact on politics" (p. 204). The author's methods of tracing ethnic identity change overtime (in Sarawak) and across different territorial areas (West Kalimantan) are also worth replicating in other parts of the world.

Despite the book's notable strengths in its theoretical approach and methods of analysis, what is missing is the role of ethnic and cultural institutions in reifying ethnic identities. Looking closely, the many Dayak cultural organizations in Indonesia and ethnically-based non-governmental organizations in Malaysia (in particular Sabah and Sarawak) have also played important roles in promoting "old", "new" and "emerging" ethnic categories (or labels). For instance, the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA), which is instrumental in promoting the "Kadazandusun" (a combination between the Kadazan and Dusun ethnic names) ethnic identity is being rivalled by the United Sabah Dusun Association (USDA) which claims to champion the interests of the Dusun people. Recently, a new organization, the Momogun National Congress (MNC), proposed a thought-provoking idea that all the indigenous

people of Sabah — including the Kadazan and Dusun — be labelled as “Momogun” for the sake of their unity. Interestingly, these cultural organizations have become the new political playing fields for political leaders seeking to widen and rejuvenate their ethnic political support. It would be interesting to probe deeper into the role of such institutions in the activation of ethnic identities.

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