

Secessionist Movements in Comparative Perspective. Edited by Ralph R. Premdas, S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe, and Alan B. Anderson. London: Pinter Publishers, 1990. Pp. x, 225.

The editors of this volume have set themselves a formidable task in attempting a comparative treatment of a diverse range of secessionist movements stretching from the Kurds in the Middle East, Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka, secessionist movements in Southeast Asia, to the Quebecois quest for self-determination in Canada. A comparative perspective, at least in part, should draw out the similarities and differences of such a broad sweep of separatist movements and indeed set out the rationale for selecting these movements in the first place. Hence a glaring omission in this book is the absence of a concluding chapter which deals with such questions and the issues raised in the first chapter by Premdas.

What makes secessionist movements significant or unique in the range of ethnic minority strategies in dealing with majority domination? Premdas, in his description of the secessionist creature, makes two useful comments. First, it invariably seeks a territorial base, the notion of a “homeland”. Second, secessionist movements have emerged only with the development of the modern nation-state, a point worth expansion.

In my view, secessionist movements are nations within a nation-state. Despite various misgivings about the concept of a nation, I shall argue for its utility. Anthony Smith (1988) contends that the nation may be usefully analysed within two overlapping concepts — the civic or territorial, and the ethnic or genealogical. The civic dimension treats nations as units of population which inhabit a demarcated territory, possess a common economy and production system, common laws, and a public mass education system. Such a conception encompasses *territory*, economy, law, and education. It is a Western conception and fits in with the idea of the “modern nation” as in modernization discourse. The no less fundamental ethnic dimension of the nation embraces genealogy, demography, traditional culture, and history (consider, for example, the Moro or Tamil conception of the nation). These are the main resources of the ethnic definition of the nation and often opposes civic

conceptions. The ethnic element is a pre-modern creation.

The idea of a sovereign nation acknowledges the supreme importance of legally recognized and respected territory or boundaries. The notion of "territorial integrity" having international recognition only grew with the emergence of the modern nation-state. Such a conception of territory is a modern invention which ethnic minorities, of the separatist kind, have incorporated in their political strategies. More importantly, the territorial conception of the nation goes beyond physical or spatial boundaries. It is a nebulous concept. As such, it cannot be seen apart from the ethnic dimension. It is part and parcel of the political process of myth-making.

Hence, as de Silva (pp. 33–36) states, the case for Tamil separatism was linked with the notion of the *homelands* of the Tamils which was based on a questionable colonial document called the Cleghorn Minute. The Minute categorically stated that there were two different nations in Sri Lanka from time immemorial — the "Cingalese" who inhabited the interior in the south and the west, and the "Malabars" (Tamils) who possess the northern and eastern districts. The document was used by Tamil activists to define the territorial limits of Tamil homelands. The Moro secessionist movement in southern Philippines relies on what Smith (1984) calls "myths of restoration". Such myths aim to connect the present generation to a noble pedigree and are genealogical. The Moros have two important myths (pp. 72–73). One combines an ethno-epic of beauty called the Tausug *parangsabil* with the Arabic concept of *sabilallah* (one who dies for the faith) and is glorified in the anti-Spanish and anti-colonial hero, Bantugan. The other is the Islamic influence of the "sultanate" which was established in 1450 and provided the Moros with an expanded political vision transcending local loyalties. Christian missionaries provided the Karen with the intellectual weapon to articulate a new sense of ethnic identity (p. 97) *vis-à-vis* the Burmans. In particular, the missionaries' belief that the Karen were one of the lost tribes of Israel led the Karen to begin reinterpreting their history. The expansion of the Lao state into Hmong territory rekindled a traditional legend concerning the Hmong king who successfully opposed the Han Chinese army until he was finally captured (pp. 115–16). Before he was executed, he vowed one day to return to liberate his people, hence the

messianic character of Hmong separatism.

The movements discussed elicit several comments. First, territory and myth are a potent mixture. The notion of *homelands* perhaps best expresses this. In any discussion of secessionist movements, the two elements are inseparable. Second, ethnic separatism is only comprehensible within the colonial experience interwoven with the process of state formation and intrusion into the lives of ethnic communities. Lastly, secessionism is only one political strategy employed by ethnic minorities to resist political domination by others. They may choose to accommodate themselves with the majority society as the Chinese do in Southeast Asian societies or retain confederal ties with the larger society, at the same time having some measure of self-determination and control as the French in Quebec. Surely, the most important question the book avoids is why do some minorities choose to secede in the first place? A comparative perspective could have thrown some light on this vital issue.

REFERENCES

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LIAN KWEN FEE