Ethnic Diversity and Social Conflict in South and Southeast Asia: Institutionalized Racism within Sri Lanka and Malaysia

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Abstract

The problem of institutionalized racism has been ground deep into the societal fabric of Sri Lanka and Malaysia. To analyze this, the paper first unpacks the concepts of institutions and racism and examines how they relate to the origins of institutionalized racism within the two aforementioned countries. Next, the paper describes the different form in which said institutionalized racism manifests in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, and makes two important observations i.e. the Sri Lankan government is more extreme in its enforcement of said racism than the Malaysian government; and the reaction of the discriminated group in Sri Lanka (the Sri Lankan Tamils) against the institutionalized racism is much more violent than the reaction of the discriminated group in Malaysia (the Malaysian Chinese). Lastly, two potential causes behind these observations i.e. geopolitics and economic growth will be evaluated.

Keywords: institutions, racism, institutionalized racism, Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Malays, Malaysian Chinese

1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to evaluate and contrast the issue of institutionalized racism currently experienced within Malaysia and Sri Lanka. It will start by clarifying the concept of institutionalized racism and follow up with a description of the similarities and differences between Malaysia
and Sri Lanka. Two important observations that will be derived is that, firstly, though both suffer from institutionalized racism, the Sri Lankan government is more extreme in its enforcement of said racism than the Malaysian government; and secondly, the reaction of the discriminated group in Sri Lanka (the Sri Lankan Tamils) against the institutionalized racism is much more violent than the reaction of the discriminated group in Malaysia (the Malaysian Chinese). Some critics might think to lay the blame for the first observation at the door of the second; this paper argues, however, that it is not just a simple case of more extreme provocation causing more extreme reaction and vice versa, but that there are other factors at play which serve as the root for the differences in both the provocations and the reactions. Two popular theories to explain this phenomenon will be put to analysis; namely, the divergence in economic growth and geopolitics of these two countries.

Malaysia and Sri Lanka were chosen for analysis because the institutionalized racism they experience is clear-cut, currently ongoing and extends nationwide. An important note in reading this paper is that it shall set aside the fact that there are various different parties with conflicting interests, ideologies and plans of action involved in this problem in both countries. For example, in Malaysia, both Malaysian Indians and Malaysian Chinese suffer from institutionalized racism, but on the whole do not work together, instead preferring to protest against said racism in racially distinct political parties and social organizations. Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka, the many rebel groups which were formed were strongly divided and showed a disposition towards fighting each other almost as much as they fought the government; the virtually complete annihilation of the “high-caste”-membered Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) by its previous ally, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), is one such example of disunity (Wilson, 2000: 126). And in all cases involved, there are various controversies regarding the identities and existence of indigenous races as opposed to “immigrant” races. However, for the sake of simplicity, only two camps involved in the issue will be pinpointed for analysis – in Malaysia, it will be the indigenous Malays vs. the Malaysian Chinese; in Sri Lanka, it will be the indigenous Sinhalese vs. the Sri Lankan Tamils.

2. Institutionalized Racism

Institutionalized racism is a hotly debated and potentially controversial issue experienced by arguably every country worldwide. Jones (1972: 5) specifies it simply as “the conscious manipulation of institutions to achieve racist objectives”. However, this definition is less than precise, mainly
because of the nature of “institutionalized racism” as an ambiguous social construct which is formed from the combination of two equally ambiguous social constructs, i.e. institutionalization and racism. Institutionalization, as defined by *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (2003: 649), is clearly put as “to make into an institution; especially: to incorporate into a structured and often highly formalized system <institutionalized values>”.

However, when one considers the elusiveness of the concept of institution, that definition becomes less clear-cut. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes, “in ordinary language the terms “institutions” and “social institutions” are used to refer to a miscellany of social forms, including conventions, rules, rituals, organisations, and systems of organisations.” Additionally, institutions are in no way static, constant features in society – “from conventions, codes of conduct, and norms of behavior to statute law, and common law, and contracts between individuals, institutions are evolving and, therefore, are continually altering the choices available to us” (North 1990: 6).

However, one characteristic all institutions have in common is that they are meant to govern or enforce certain rules of a society. In other words, “an institution is a system of social factors that conjointly generate a regularity of behavior” (Greif, 2006: 30). It should be noted that Greif (2006: 30) had clarified this definition by stating, “[e]ach component of this system is social in being a man-made, nonphysical factor that is exogenous to each individual whose behavior it influences.” This clarification gives rise to two implications: one, that an institution, created as it is from “man-made factors”, has a culture and purpose which reflects the ideologies and intentions of its creators; two, that an institution, being “exogenous to each individual”, imposes constraints upon the lives of people who are bound, whether by culture or by law, to follow it (Greif, 2006: 30). In general, institutions can be separated into two categories – formal institutions (i.e. consciously established with specific individuals as creators) such as “rules that human beings devise”, and informal institutions (naturally arising as a result of the culture and needs of a society) such as “conventions and codes of behavior” (North, 1990: 4). These institutions are very much intertwined, as they’re based on similar cultural traditions and beliefs within a society.

This is important in the context of Sri Lanka and Malaysia in that both their formal and informal institutions are imbued with institutionalized racism. One interesting shared similarity between these two countries lies in the order and identity of their conquerors from the colonial period – they were first conquered by the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, and finally by the British (Levy, 1974: 13-14). Thus, one may theorize that, starting from the colonial period onwards, institutions within these two countries
have followed a closely similar development path, as they are “modeled at their initial stage along the forms of [the same] Western institutions” (Levy, 1974: 7). After all, the colonizers, especially the British, had imposed their own political administrations, set up their own Western-styled schools and religious establishments, and instilled “generally cautious economic policies” which has resulted, until today, in the “fear of inflation, the essential reliance on the private sector, and the acceptance of foreign investment” in both countries (Bruton, 1992: 329). Following upon the heels of this, the formal institutions of government within Malaysia and Sri Lanka, influenced as they are by the elements of racism found within the culture and informal institutions of the country, creates and enforces more formal institutions which are characterized by institutionalized racism, and so strengthens even further the racist influences within the lives of the people. A vicious cycle is thus created from this “interlocking double-structure of [people] … and … social practices” (Harré, 1980: 52).

Note that this is not to say that institutions within other countries are free from racism – on the contrary, the United States serves as an example of how institutionalized racism, especially against the African American community, had been weaved into many of its institutions in its history. However, the difference between countries like the United States and countries like Malaysia and Sri Lanka is that, currently, while the former has attempted to counter institutionalized racism via alteration of old institutions (applying affirmative action policies to oppose discrimination within the institution of education), destruction of old institutions (eradicating the Old South’s plantation economy) or creation of new ones (founding formal institutions such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909), the latter two have mostly taken steps which result in the perpetuation of said racism, as will be shown later in the paper.

The next concept related to the theory of institutionalized racism is racism itself. To define racism, however, one must first deal with the issue of race. As van den Berghe noted in his work of Race and Racism (1967: 9), “The term ‘race’ has been quite confusing because of its four principal connotations.” Of the four that he stated, the only truly relevant definition to this analysis would be the definition of “a human group that defines itself and/or is defined by other groups as different from other groups by virtue of innate and immutable physical characteristics. These physical characteristics are in turn believed to be intrinsically related to moral, intellectual, and other non-physical attributes or abilities.” In other words, the term “race” refers to “a group that is socially defined but on the basis of physical criteria” (van den Berghe, 1967: 9). It is often intertwined with, but should not be confused as, the concept of ethnicity, which
refers to being “socially defined but on the basis of cultural criteria” (van den Berghe, 1967: 10). One should remember, also, that using physical characteristics as criterion for defining a race is very problematic; as noted in Vol. 9 of the Encyclopedia Britannica (2003: 876), “Human races are in a continuous state of flux, with genes constantly flowing from one gene pool to another. This process is known as admixture (also called miscegenation, or gene flow).” From this, one could thus conclude that “all existing human groups are of definite mixed origin […] modern racial classifications are […] purely artificial, and do not represent ‘racially pure’ groupings” (Bunche, 1968: 14-15). This is especially true in this age of globalization; with the disintegration of the geographic boundaries that used to hinder migration and interracial mingling, the only barrier which still preserves “racial purity” would be presumed cultural boundaries. However, this bastion has proven to be particularly difficult to surmount – cultural boundaries have oft-times been instrumental in maintaining the aforementioned “racial purity” and racial isolation. Such culturally-created racial isolation oft-times gives rise to the social construct of racism, which can otherwise be known as “the transformation of race prejudice […] through the exercise of power against a racial group defined as inferior, by individuals and institutions with the intentional or unintentional support of the entire culture” (Jones 1972: 117). Note that the implication here is that only aggressive hostility is classified as racism; passive hostility, such as merely possessing, but not actually acting upon, the belief in one’s own racial superiority over another, can just be classified as race prejudice.

All this is significant when applied to the situation in Malaysia and Sri Lanka as the parties involved shows such racial divides based on cultural boundaries. Though they live within the same countries and so, would be unhindered in admixture, racism holds them back from doing so. As shown by a telephone survey of 1,200 Malaysians conducted by the Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research, “About 42% of the population do not consider themselves Malaysian first, and 46% said ethnicity was important in voting, 55% blamed politicians for racial problems and 70% would help their own ethnic group first. According to the survey, 58% of Malays, 63% of Chinese and 43% of Indians polled agreed with the survey item that ‘in general, most Malays are lazy’. Meanwhile, 71% of Malays, 60% of Chinese and 47% of Indians agreed with the generalization that ‘in general, most Chinese are greedy’” (Kuppusamy, 2006). Meanwhile, a questionnaire aimed at determining ethnic stereotypes in Sri Lanka concluded the following: “Sinhalese (e.g., Selfish, Foolish), Sri Lankan Tamils (e.g., Loves own ethnic group, Terrorist or supporters of terrorism) [and] Indian Tamils (e.g., Poor, Naïve)” (Schaller, 2006: 6). Such negative stereotypes serve to discourage interaction between the races, which leads
to further ignorance and fear; and so, yet another vicious cycle is created – racism results in the hindering of intermingling and interbreeding, which leads to further “racial purity” and segregation, which leads to yet more racism.

Racism within Malaysia and Sri Lanka can be traced back to the colonial period of the British Empire, which was undoubtedly the most influential colonizer of these two countries. It was in that period that the foreign-born community swelled drastically, not via the natural means of migration and trade, but instead through the large-scale British importation of indentured labour to work in the local plantations and mines. Institutionalized racism was affixed within the lives of the local colonized populations, as the British “white race” became the de facto superior race. Furthermore, the British had favoured a divide-and-conquer style of rule which separated the colonized according to class and race. As Levine (2007: 125) noted, “British policy generally sought a degree of collaboration with those who they saw as the elites among the locals.” It did not help that in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, the said elites were not the indigenous population, but were instead members of the “immigrant” races, for this set the stage for the racial problems which were to come. For example, British colonizers in Malaysia had created a dual economy in which it favoured the Chinese businessmen, thus alienating the local Malays and causing resentment to arise (Gambe, 1999: 77). Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka it was the Sri Lankan Tamils who were regarded by the British imperialists as their “source of second-tier civil servants” (Pereira, 1983). And so, economic segregation by race was intensified in both these countries, leading to social disparities and increased hostilities, especially on the part of the indigenous Sinhalese in Sri Lanka and Malays in Malaysia, who naturally felt that their economic and political power had been supplanted by the colonizers and newcomers.

This tense situation was only truly brought into the spotlight after these two countries attained independence from the British, for without the oppressing thumb of the colonizers to force the people into compliance, it soon became very clear that the only shared heritage of these clashing races in their respective countries was their colonial past, which was the root of the segregation in the first place. And so, it is hardly surprising that over the years, the Sinhalese-dominated government in Sri Lanka and the Malay-dominated government in Malaysia have clearly expressed their racial hostility and decided that “[t]he concept of Bhumiputra (‘son of the soil’ in Malaysia – ethnic Malays – in relation to the Chinese or the Indians) or Sinhala Buddhaputra (member of the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka in relation to the Sri Lanka Tamils) illustrates the concept of the true national, and when it comes to the test it is the true national
(Bhumiputra or Sinhala Buddhaputra) which enjoys precedence” (Wilson, 2000: 7). This belief is shown via the enactment of various institutionally racist laws which have targeted the main institutions of politics, language, education, religion, etc. As shown in Table 1, these laws favour the Malay and Sinhalese race in Malaysia and Sri Lanka respectively.

The unfortunate consequence of these laws, however, is that it encourages racism to occur far beyond the details specified by the said acts. One example would be the resultant increase in the Malaysian bumiputera share in all economic sectors at the expense of the Chinese as a consequence of the 1970 New Economic Policy (Phang, 2000: 99); another would be the resultant decrease in employment of non-Sinhala-speaking

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<th>Table 1 Institutionally Racist Laws in Malaysia and Sri Lanka</th>
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Sri Lankan Tamils within the Sri Lankan civil service as a consequence of the 1956 Sinhala Only Bill.

It is equally clear, that the acts passed by the Sri Lankan government, especially the 1948 Ceylon Citizenship Act, show them to be far more extreme than that of the Malaysian government in enforcing institutionalized racism. The effect of this zealousness can be seen in the difference in reaction of the discriminated groups against the institutionalized racism oppressing them. In the case of Malaysia, protests against said racism has mostly been limited to politicking and demonstrations; in Sri Lanka, however, it has resulted in the emergence of various militant groups, the brutality of a civil war, and the death of millions. However, the situation in Sri Lanka is, as mentioned previously, not just a simple case of extreme provocation causing extreme reactions – most cases of institutionalized racism, many of which are equally or even more extreme than that found in Sri Lanka (discrimination of Jews within the Third Reich, enforcement of the Apartheid Policy within South Africa), do not result in the emergence of so many rebel groups quite as violent and militant as those found in Sri Lanka. Indeed, the non-violent reaction of Malaysia’s discriminated groups is more like the norm.

One argument which may be employed to answer the question of why more extreme governmental actions of and civilian reactions against institutionalized racism occurred in Sri Lanka as opposed to that in Malaysia is that better economic conditions in Malaysia as opposed to Sri Lanka has lead to a higher tolerance amongst the Malaysian Chinese against the institutionalized racism than amongst the Sri Lankan Tamils. Referring to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)’s *World Factbook*, Malaysia is approximately five times larger than Sri Lanka in terms of total land area, and yet, referring to the United Nations *World Prospects* report, population density within Sri Lanka is approximate three and a half times larger than that of Malaysia. Additionally, according to the World Bank’s World Development Indicators, Sri Lanka’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has, since 1960 onwards, consistently been lower than that of Malaysia. Both Malaysia’s GDP per capita and Human Development Index (HDI), as of the year 2010, are also significantly higher than that of Sri Lanka. This in itself does not translate to inevitable institutionalized racism; however, when paired with a poorer economic growth, i.e. lower GDP per capita, it stands to reason that the people of Sri Lanka would be less inclined to look favourably upon “outsiders” who threaten their possession of their scarce resources. In the case of Malaysia, Mauzy (1993) noted that rapid economic growth could be the most important variable in explaining the absence of ethnic violence (as occurred in Lebanon and Sri Lanka) in response to preferential policies.
that led to growing ethnic polarization. Every non-Malay she interviewed between October and December 1990 “cited the continued possibilities of making money as the chief reason why there has been no ethnic violence in Malaysia, despite more polarisation, less accommodation and more repression” (Mauzy, 1993: 127).

War has often been closely linked with economic problems. Many analysts share Urdang’s (2002: 191) belief that “political turmoil can trigger economic chaos, and economic crisis can produce political turmoil.” That economic situations play an important role in interethnic conflict seems obvious. Collins (1975: 389-390) believed that the more severe a (political/economic) crisis, the greater the tendency for groups to coalesce along the lines of collective interests and the society to polarize into two-sided conflicts. Van Evera (1994: 9) claimed that the publics become receptive to scapegoat myths (which are more widely believed) when economic conditions deteriorate. If one links this to the situation in Sri Lanka, the following picture may be derived – Sri Lanka, a relatively smaller country than Malaysia, with a relatively higher population density, is driven by the need to reduce the competition for resource allocation. Recognizing this problem, the Sri Lankan government attempts to win political favour from the Sinhalese majority by moving the resource allocation away from the Sri Lankan Tamil minority. In this light, the 1948 Ceylon Citizenship Act could be seen as a shrewd move to “reserve” Sri Lanka for the Sinhalese. In less ideological terms, the government may have been attempting to curry political favour from the Sinhalese majority by “removing” their competition for possession of said scarce resources. However, the scheme backfired in that these economically irrational actions stunts economic growth within Sri Lanka. For the Sri Lankan Tamils, dissatisfaction with poor economic growth combined with anger against institutionalized racism, which led to violence and civil war. In other words, by pushing them into statelessness, the government created a situation in which the Indian Tamils had nothing to lose and everything to gain from inciting rebellion.

Meanwhile, a different pattern occurred within Malaysia. The Malaysian government also recognized that the way to winning political favour involved manipulation of resource allocation to favour the Malay majority, and so, the Malay Special Privileges were enacted, albeit at the expense of the Malaysian Chinese minority. However, Malaysia, as a developing country with one of the best economic records within Asia, does not feel the same level of threat as does Sri Lanka regarding the competition for allocation of scarce resources, and so, the Malaysian government chooses to mostly interfere with the resources of employment and education, rather than of citizenship as does Sri Lanka. The competition for the
relatively richer resources in Malaysia was thus less strife-filled than that of Sri Lanka. The Malaysian government thus enacted milder policies which constrained and hampered, rather than removed completely, the competition for resources, using the 1970 New Economic policy.

Furthermore, a higher economic growth also translates to a higher living standard for all members of the Malaysian population, including the marginalized Malaysian Chinese. In effect, this raises the costs of launching an all-out war against institutionalized racism, for unlike the Indian Tamils, who have been pushed to the brink of statelessness, the Malaysian Chinese would have more to lose in the advent of violence. And so, the Malaysian Chinese exhibit a higher tolerance for the institutionalized racism than do the Indian Tamils. One might note that their methods of protest – politicking and demonstrations – will not lead to any significant losses of economic wealth on their parts. And so, though the Malaysian Chinese are discriminated against, though they feel dissatisfaction at the inequality of political power and resource allocation, they are, on the whole, still a relatively wealthy group within Malaysia. Thus, their methods of protesting against the institutionalized racism – via politicking and demonstrations – will not lead to significant losses of economic wealth on their parts.

This argument is interesting, but has its weaknesses. Firstly, if poor economic growth had lead to violence in Sri Lanka, then races other than the Sri Lankan Tamils should be fighting against the government, for though institutionalized racism is directed primarily at the Sri Lankan Tamils, the country as a whole suffers. Also, as noted by Blainey (1973: 88), “the theories which point to economic needs as the mainspring of wars assume that inadequate finance did not usually deter nations from initiating a war.” It would be economically irrational and terribly ironic if poor economic growth had encouraged the Sri Lankan government and the rebels to fight a costly war which would stunt their economic growth even further. In fact, it would be more feasible for Malaysia to incite a war – according to Goldstein (1988: 260-262), major wars generally occur when a country has sufficient resources to fund them, and that generally is only possible after “a sustained period of stable economic growth” (Cashman, 1993: 135).

3. Truncated Nation and “Double Minority”

A second argument which may be applied is that it was influenced by the proximity of India, the Sri Lankan Tamils’ homeland, to Sri Lanka, as compared to the larger distance between China, the Malaysian Chinese’s ancestral homeland, and Malaysia. A factor that stands out here is the
existence of borders that bisect nationalities, which are usually more troublesome than those that follow national demographic divides because the borders that bisect nationalities entrap parts of nationalities within the boundaries of states dominated by other ethnic groups (van Evera, 1994: 22). Revanchist tendencies of the adjacent truncated nations – implicit or expressed – or sympathy and support (including logistic or even arms support) from co-ethnics who are the group in power across the border often serve to fuel ethnic intensity of the minorities this side of the border or potential separatist regional sentiment of the entrapped nationalities, as in the case of Sri Lanka, Cyprus and Northern Ireland, in marked contrast to the absence of such borders for Malaysia and Fiji. As noted by Schaller (2006: 615), Sinhalese people are indigenous to Sri Lanka, but the Tamils race has spread all over the globe. And so, “reference must […] be made to the ‘double minority’ factor – both Sinhalese and Tamil perceive themselves to be minority populations under threat, the former in relation to the Tamil population in South India, and the latter in relation to the Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka” (Lewer, 2002). Within Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese feel the pressure to assert their dominance, as they acutely feel their vulnerability in the face of the geographical power behind the Sri Lankan Tamils, who are presumed to have the weapons and mental support of their ethnic brethren just across the Park Strait within India’s Tamil Nadu. So, in an attempt to correct this imbalance of power, the Sinhalese-dominated government is far more extreme in their efforts in subjugating the Tamil masses via law and institutionalized racism. The proximity aided in the passing of the 1948 Ceylon Citizenship Act, as many of the stateless Sri Lankan Tamils were deported back to India. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan Tamils are caught between two conflicting powers, for they are paradoxically both emboldened by their proximity to their Tamil Nadu allies and threatened by their status as a marginalized population minority within Sri Lanka. These two factors serve to incite the extreme violence of reaction from the Sri Lankan Tamils. As Schaller (2006: 617) concludes, “each group may perceive the other to be especially malevolent and untrustworthy, may feel especially justified in the use of violence against the other, and may be especially wary of negotiated attempts at conflict resolution.”

Meanwhile, Malays are the undisputed population majority in Malaysia, both within the country itself as well as within the broader geographical region. Malaysia is close to Indonesia, which is the largest Muslim country in the world and whose people have a shared history as having been the same country, “Tanah Melayu”, with Malaysia before the advent of colonialism. Malaysian Chinese relations with China has not been as close as that of the Sri Lankan Tamils with India, as many factors
aside from distance – for example, “[...] the early 1950s [...] reported excesses of the Communist government against landlords and other members of the property holding class in Southern China [had] hardened local anti-Communist sentiment in Malaya and resulted in [...] many of the Malayan Chinese [beginning] to regard Malaya as their sole country of residence” (Heng, 1988: 100-101) – is one such example. China has similarly been passive and silent in the face of the 1998 Indonesian anti-Chinese riots (Zheng, 2010: 186). And so, in Malaysia, it is clear to the Malays and the Malay-dominated government who has the upper hand in political and geographical power. The only threat the Malaysian Chinese could pose to the Malays is in terms of economic superiority and wealth, and the government has already taken steps to partially nullify said threat with the New Economic Policy, which is by far the most extreme step of institutionalized racism inflicted within Malaysia. Meanwhile, from the perspective of the Malaysian Chinese, all this translates to a need for more concessions and compromise, for without the backing of a powerful neighbouring country, using violent means to fight for their rights would have a higher chance of being a losing battle.

This argument is a tempting one, but can also found to have its imperfections with a closer look at the histories of India-Sri Lanka and Malaysia-China relations. It is true that cultural ties between the Tamils of Tamil Nadu and the Sri Lankan Tamils of Sri Lanka has resulted in the emergence of Tamil Nadu allies calling for Sri Lanka’s Sri Lankan Tamils’ secession, declaration of an independent Tamil Eelam, and military support to the Sri Lankan rebel groups. It is also true that during the late 1980s and early 1990s, India’s foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, had played an important role in training and equipping Tamil militants (Wilson, 2000: 126) and so, it fits previous analysis that India has a part in creating a feeling of vulnerability within the Sri Lankan government, while providing encouragement for further incitement of violence among the Sri Lankan Tamils. However, one should note that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which eventually became the main militant rebel group within Sri Lanka, had significantly a hostile relationship with India, especially after the LTTE’s assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the sixth Prime Minister of India. During the peace talks, India, more often than not, showed support for the Sri Lankan government rather than for the rebels. After the breakdown of the peace talks in 2006, “the Sri Lankan government [...] successfully pursued an ambitious military campaign to eliminate the LTTE, aided by the military and financial support of India. This was largely unpublicized because of Indian sensitivities about the politics of Tamil Nadu [...]” (Keethaponcalan, 2011: 52, italics added). One can see from this
that India had not played as supportive a role of the Tamil Indians as commonly believed.

Meanwhile, though Malaysia does not enjoy an easy across-border access to China as does Sri Lanka, China has managed to exert its influence in Malaysia previously. One strong example is its backing of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) during the Malayan Emergency. In fact, it is very clear that the only instances in which Malaysian Chinese have managed to exert clear political dominance over Malaysia is when they possess the backing of China; when China finally decided to “cut off financial and moral support for communist parties in Southeast Asia[,] that decision put the Malayan Communist Party and other Communist parties in Southeast Asia on the defensive, and they finally gave up their struggle” (Khoon, 2005: 255). This truly indicates how crucial the support of a powerful “big neighbour” is. Unfortunately, as noted before, China has preferred to follow a policy of non-interference regarding such racial issues that plague countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. As Soon (1973: 18) said, “it is clear […] that China can be selective in its support of […] allies.” So, one may conclude that it is less the problem of distance, and more the problem of lack of interest which fueled China’s passiveness in the face of anti-Chinese marginalization in Southeast Asia.

4. Historical Geography of Ethnicity

The discussion so far has repeatedly brought up the issue of homeland-immigrant dichotomy. The critical difference between two distinct types of ethnicity – homeland and immigrant ethnic groups – indeed requires recognition. Their definition is subjective, being related to the real or mythical attachment of an ethnic group to the land on which it resides (Smith, 1981; Murphy, 1989). Ethnic identity is generally more intense and more ascriptive in homeland communities than in immigrant societies. It is also more explicitly expressed in patterns of political organization and spatial segregation in states composed of the former (Esman, 1985). Homeland communities are sometimes described as “plural” (or “deeply divided”) to differentiate them from immigrant societies which are often described as “pluralistic” (Garcia, 1980). The homeland-immigrant distinction is in fact crucial as a determinant in the analysis of ethnic coexistence and conflict, public policy and ethnic response, in a multiethnic (including “bi-ethnic”) society. Consider here a trichotomous taxonomy of multiethnic states based on their ethnic historical geography: “homeland-multiethnic states”, “immigrant-multiethnic states” and “mixed-multiethnic states”. The first category refers to those composed of two or more homeland ethnic groups of significant proportions.
Sri Lanka, with her Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority who claim
descent from residents of the former Jaffna Kingdom in the north of
the island (where the Tamils now constitute a majority in Sri Lanka’s
Northern Province) and the Vannimai chieftaincies from the east, can
be considered as belonging to this category, which also includes, among
others, Spain, Belgium, Britain, Italy, Nigeria, India, Russia and the
former Yugoslavia. The second category refers to immigrant states that
consist of more than one major immigrant ethnic group but are devoid of
significant homeland ones, e.g. the United States, Canada, Mauritius and
Trinidad and Tobago. The essential features of an immigrant-multiethnic
society are that its settlers (and therefore their descendants) are diverse
in ethnicity, and that all settlers feel an equally legitimate claim upon it,
regardless of their ethno-national background. In the homeland/immigrant
categorization, Malaysia belongs to the third category, which includes
countries whose population comprises homeland and immigrant ethnic
groups (in the eyes of the so-called “indigenous” population, the latter
includes descendants of the “latecomers” to the land), both of significant
proportions. Hence by contrast, whereas societies such as Sri Lanka can
be described as homeland-multiethnic (with her Sinhalese majority who
consider themselves “indigenous” vs. the minority Tamils most of whom
also considered themselves “indigenous” on the peninsula), Malaysia
represents a homeland-immigrant case of ethnic relations. In a multiethnic
democracy, where all component groups are homeland communities,
as in Sri Lanka, their ethnic identity is equally intense and ascriptive.
It is, however, not so in a country like Malaysia where one community
perceives itself as homeland and the other community is unambiguously
descendants of the late-coming immigrants. When large-scale Chinese
immigration began in the late nineteenth century into British Malaya, the
Malay people had already long established themselves as an indigenous
population with an organized socio-political system, after displacing the
earlier inhabitants (orang asli) since time immemorial. The basic problem
with this third type of society (homeland-immigrant) stems from the primal
title to a homeland claimed by the indigenous ethno-national group. As
Conner (1986: 20) explained:

Though it may never be exercised, the power of eviction that is
inherent in such a title to the territory may be translated into action at
any time. Members of a diaspora can therefore never be at home in a
homeland. They are at best sojourners, remaining at the sufferance of
the indigenous people.

The groups are unequal and bargaining is often one-sided in a
democracy that Mauzy (1993: 124) called “coercive consociationalism”
(or Smooha’s “ethnic democracy”) – consociationalism on the terms of one side. In such a democracy that is composed of both homeland and immigrant communities, the situation is more complex than the pure homeland- and immigrant-multiethnic/biethnic categories. To understand this one needs to distinguish between two types of homeland movements. The first category refers to peoples who already possess their own territorial state, but feel threatened by the “invasion” of aliens, who may reduce them to the status of a demographic minority in their own homeland and eventually assume control both of the State and of the economy. The second refers to ethnoregionalism – movements “directed not at immigrants but at the central state, to protect or redeem the homeland, its culture, and its economy from neglect, encroachments, or domination by an alien central government and the ethnic groups it represents” (Esman, 1985: 439). The first type is particularly of interest here in the context of Malaysia. In this case, the political mobilization of the homeland peoples has been triggered and sustained by the fear of being overwhelmed and dispossessed by the (economically) aggressive immigrants. The reactive homeland movements by the native peoples thus aim to retain control of the State, economy and of their ancestral homeland. Their strategy is to “terminate and if possible to reverse the flow of immigration, to entrench the political, economic, and cultural position of native sons by preferential rules and by limiting the rights and opportunities of immigrants” (ibid.: 438). This deviation from the ethnic-neutral position of the State led Smooha (1990) to proclaim the limitation of the explanatory powers of the two conventional models of multiethnic democracies, majoritarian and consociational, and propose a third regime type: the “ethnic democracy”. In an ethnic democracy, while individual civil rights are enjoyed universally and certain collective rights are extended to ethnic minorities, the State is institutionally dominated by the majority. The imbalance in ethnic intensity between homeland and immigrant communities enables the former to exercise, or attempt to exercise, politico-economic hegemony within the framework of democracy by seizing the control of the State and implementing government-mandated preferential policies, yet without causing a violent rebellion from the immigrant population or descendants of the “latecomers” (e.g. Malaysia, Fiji, the Indian state of Assam, at different critical structural periods). If the two communities are homeland-based with equal ethnic intensity, such an attempt by one may result in a breakdown of the democratic machinery, violent ethnic strife and ethnoregionalism – the second type of homeland movement in the above typology, e.g. Sri Lanka, Cyprus and Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the homeland-immigrant categorization has increasingly been attracting criticism. Not least is the stigma that the so-called “indigenous” groups
insist on forcing upon the descendants of the immigrants by continuing to tag them “immigrants” even when they are generations removed from their forefathers who first migrated to the land. Also being questioned by the descendants of immigrants is the imbalance in rights often claimed by the “homeland” groups who in the eyes of the former are simply distinguished from them by having forefathers who arrived in the land much earlier in historical, or prehistoric, times.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, geopolitics with its link to the historical geography of ethnicity, and economic growth have been argued to be the root causes for the contrast in degree of institutionalized racism and reaction against said racism occurring within Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Both have their weaknesses, however. One observation that should be made is that this problem is not confined solely to the realms of Sri Lanka and Malaysia, but is instead a problem which occurs worldwide. And so, the paper ends with a quote from Dewey (1957: 21-22), “We may desire abolition of war, industrial justice, greater equality of opportunity for all. But no amount of preaching good will or the golden rule or cultivation of sentiments of love and equity will accomplish the results. There must be change in objective arrangements and institutions. We must work on the environment, not merely on the hearts of men.”

Notes

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Affirmative action policies, while aimed at reducing discrimination of under-represented groups, are rife with controversies. Doubt has been cast as to whether they are truly effective at alleviating institutionalized racism.

2. This classification follows Yiftachel (1992).

3. The issue of “numerical significance”, nevertheless, is not the sole criterion involved here.

4. The long history of Sri Lanka Tamils is also linguistically reflected in the archaism noted in their dialects and retention of vocabulary no longer in everyday use in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

5. To categorize these countries as homeland-multiethnic states is not to deny the possible existence of substantial immigrant communities in these countries (including the later Tamil immigrants to Sri Lanka). Or in another context, the so-called “new minorities” are, however, not seen as such important players in the political arena as the homeland communities, e.g. the Castilians, Catalans and Basques of Spain, who are directly responsible for the identity and survival of these countries as national entities.

6. Although pure immigrant states like Mauritius and Trinidad and Tobago best fit this category, small segments of its population being homeland ethnic groups does not disqualify a state from this immigrant country status. The United States of America, for instance, is considered an immigrant state despite the existence of the homeland communities of the Native Americans (Amerindians). As in the definition of homeland multiethnic states, it is the politically important ethnic groups that matter, for instance the blacks and whites in the US, the Anglophones and Francophones in Canada.

7. Equivalent circumstances occur when all communities are immigrant and similar in time of arrival, which is crucial since a community that arrived (e.g. the Malays in Malaysia) earlier may consider itself more “homeland” than late-comers (the Chinese and Indians).


9. Prominent examples of such countries include Malaysia where such policy impact has been an integral part of the politico-economic structure of the country since the 1970s, Fiji where such policy imperative has been in progress since the mid-1980s coup and the post-apartheid South Africa where such policy direction is increasingly inevitable to allay the growing social discontent of newly empowered but economically backward ethnic majority. Among other countries where the politically dominant ethnic majority has in one way or another voted themselves preferences at one stage or another over the economically more successful minorities are Sri Lanka (in which, as we have seen, partly due to her particular historical geography of ethnic, such policy had resulted in a violent rebellion), Nigeria, various states of India, Indonesia, Uganda, Guyana, Trinidad and Sierra Leone (see, e.g., Sowell, 1990).
References


