

SCAPEGOATING THE “OTHER” IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Posted by AsiaViews | Mar 16, 2018 | 0  | ★★★★★

By Rosalia Sciortino*

There is much talk in Southeast Asia about the rise of authoritarianism and the retrenchment of democracy, here intended not only as an electoral system, but most importantly as a governance structure that trusts in the impartial rule of law, encourages stakeholders’ participation in decision-making, respects alternative views and provides protection for minority interests. Paradoxically, those countries with more open election systems appear to be dismissing these core principles as they become besieged by populist and nationalist ideologies.

Identity politics based on ethnic, religious, socio-cultural or gender boundaries is increasingly employed for certain parties to gain popularity, win elections, or simply stay in power. Their strategy is to unify support for them by constructing the perception of a uniform majority with shared characteristics that is threatened by a common enemy to be despised on moral and religious grounds.

The projected “bogeyman” is preferably a people who are already stigmatized, whom the public would not feel compelled to defend due to entrenched and diffuse prejudices. Possible opponents, whether in power or wishing to be, will not challenge the populist rhetoric for fear of losing popularity and thus, votes, and for the few emphatic voices there is always social pressure and public shame to mute them.

The most egregious examples of this “us against them” tactic are occurring in the Philippines, Myanmar and Indonesia. Although the victims differ, the dynamics of their persecution are similar.

In the Philippines, the already stigmatized group of drug users has (literally) become the moving target of President Duterte’s populist promise to protect the nation from the “greatest domestic threat”. His “War on Drugs” involves the extra-judiciary killings of suspected addicts, irrespective of the amount of drugs, their age, or the level of evidence. The police count 3,900

deaths of “suspects that resisted arrest”, but independent sources reckon the police and “unidentified gunmen” killed more than 12,000 persons, mostly young, poor and barely, if at all, involved in drug use or trade.

In the only ASEAN country with no death penalty, this egregious disregard for the law, let alone human rights, has been made socially acceptable by dehumanizing drugs addicts because of their addiction. In spite of opposition of the powerful Catholic Church and increased international criticism, Duterte continues to proclaim his intentions to boost the war, while failing to deliver on his other promises of addressing poverty, corruption and Manila traffic.

In Myanmar, discrimination against the Muslim Rohingyas, as an ethno-religious minority, is a colonial legacy marred by repeated exoduses that have intensified since the 2011 “democratization” of the country.

Along with the junta accepting the National League of Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi and allowing it to participate in the 2015 national election, Buddhist nationalism has surfaced with the military’s blessings. The Association for the Protection of Race and Religion” (abbreviated as *MaBaTha*) and other related movements, have inflamed anti-Muslim sentiments and have spread the claim that Rohingyas are not Burmese citizens although many did in fact have citizenship until the government revoke it.

On the eve of the election, parliamentarians passed four laws on the “Protection of Race and Religion” to limit conversion, polygamy, mixed marriages and the number of children which “non-Buddhist” (read Muslim and particularly Rohingya, minorities) can have. The NLD won the election, but was effectively silenced by its getting caught in the same mentality and having to show loyalty to Buddhism.

This climate enabled the large-scale destruction of Rohingya villages and violence against the inhabitants under the guise of military counter-insurgency operations last August, pushing 650,000 Rohingyas to flee into Bangladesh. And the generals for now enjoy unprecedented approval.

The politicization of religion has also happened in Muslim-majority Indonesia, but this time those under attack are non-Muslims and people considered “not Muslim enough”. With the backing of opposition parties, conservative groups have been “experimenting” with a variety of targets.

The year 2016 saw efforts to revive fears of “communists” (and supposed atheists) as a threat to national unity. These charges, aimed at resuscitating the state’s justification of the 1965 mass killings of a million suspected communists and allies, proved outdated for the public.

The spotlight shifted to sexual minorities for a while, and then moved to ethnic and religious minorities. Negative sentiment swelled during the Jakarta gubernatorial race, which ended with the ethnic Chinese, non-Muslim frontrunner, incumbent Governor Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama Basuki loosing and being imprisoned with an allegation of blasphemy, many believe had more political than religious grounds.

The dismay over deepening societal fractures led to the hasty reemphasizing by the government and civil society of the principles of “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (Unity in Diversity). Religious populism, however, shifted back to those whose diversity is generally excluded from discussion on the constitutionally-prescribed pluralism. The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are an easy target, with over 80 percent respondents in a recent survey viewing them as a threat to society, even though about half would accept them as family members and about 60 percent recognize their rights as citizens. Politicians are set to inflame homophobic sentiments as part of a broader campaign to criminalize sex outside of marriage.

This sudden concern for “people’s bedrooms”—rather than more pressing matters like corruption and inequity— is seen as a tactic to gain conservative credentials and shore up votes in the upcoming local and national elections. And if necessary, attacks on other target groups can always be resumed. While opposition parties are at the forefront, the President and his supporters, even if willing, would not rebuke them for fear of being labeled “immoral” and become ineligible.

The scapegoating of minorities has thus become a short-cut to power, with little reflection on the consequences of opening public space to sectarianism and condoning abuses.

All this is happening while these three governments and ASEAN have subscribed to the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to its promise “to leave no one behind”. It is high time to think about what “no one” really means.

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The article was originally published in The Jakarta Post on 21 February 2018

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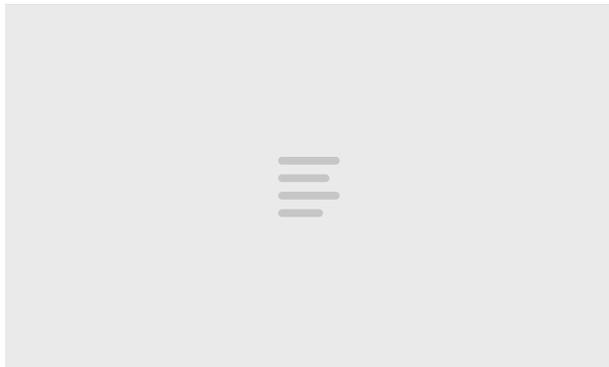
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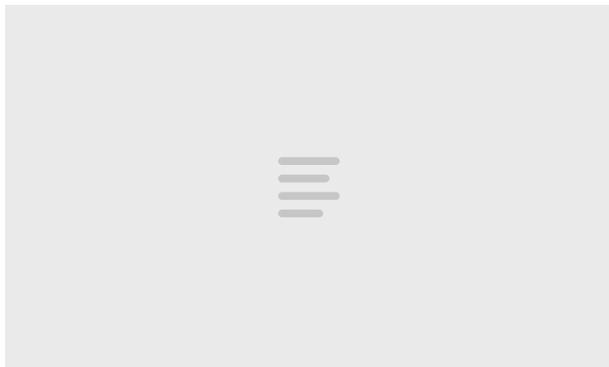
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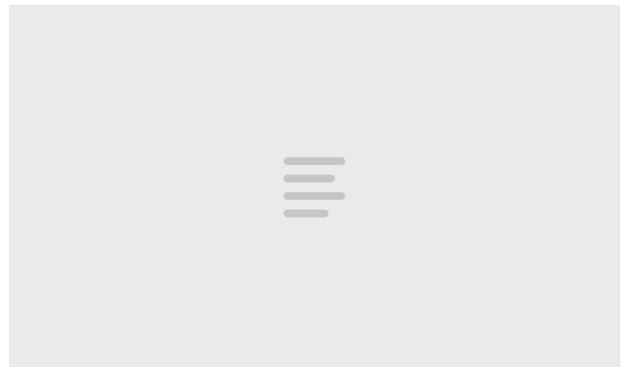
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