The Dynamics of Marginalization, Citizenship and 'Nation-of-Intent' in Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia struggles with national identity, ethnic diversity, and inclusive citizenship through a historical and sociopolitical lens. Malaysia's political landscape is marked by a unique blend of multiculturalism, economic disparities, and regional divides. With a diverse population comprising multiple ethnic groups, the challenge of creating a cohesive national identity while respecting cultural distinctions has always been a central issue. The challenge is to find ways of addressing and theorizing unconscious ideas in divergent patterns of the nation, especially in Malaysia, which can be fragmented and contradictory and which cut across the traditional fault lines of ethnicity. Therefore, there is an opportunity for the concept of 'nation-of-intent' to be explicitly organized around ideas, identification and patterns which are recognizably multiple and sometimes, unstable, with visible contradictions in the Malaysian citizens 'personal locations.'

The Concept of 'Nation-of-Intent' and the Marginalized

There is a newly focused understanding of the constructive nature of the process undertake socially and personally, as citizens find their place in an identity grouping and explore the understanding of themselves and the social order which this can bring. The concept of 'nation-of-intent' is well attuned to the needs of the Malaysian socio-political landscape; as politics becomes more concerned with subjectivity, it more than ever needs a language in which to talk about interrelationships between the consciousness of the idea of the nation and social positioning. The concept of 'nation-of-intent' could, again in principle, supply such a language; it could make sense of the complex business of creating and re-creating 'identities' and building a nation, and of filling these out with content, as well as exploring the intense 'investments' which citizens hold in them, and the deep aggression to which they often give rise.

Shamsul (1996) conceptualized the 'nation-of-intent' as a vision of territorial entity, a set of institutions, an ideal-type citizen, and an identity profile that a group of 'social-engineers' have in mind and try to implement. It will often be an idealistic form shared by several people who identify themselves not only with one another, but with a whole nation whose other members they hope will join their vision. A 'nation-of-intent' can be the idea of statesman wishing to unite different groups under his government's authority, of opposing party, a separatist group, a religious or other community. The concept of 'nation-of-intent' depicts an idea of a nation that still needs to be constructed or reconstructed. It is employed as the basis for a platform expressing dissent or a challenged to the established notion of a nation. It promises the citizens an opportunity to participate in the process of nation building. It further confirms this highly fluid notion of nationality. The discourse of the nation can be constructed in many different forms. This suggests that the form and content of national identity can be defined and redefined through dialogue and democratic decision. Individuals experience their nationality very differently. Thus, the concept of 'nation-of-intent' refers to the various aspects such as of ethnic, class and gender, and are sources of identity that are transcended by the primary identity of nation. The idea of a modern large-scale republic must appeal to the understanding of shared history, common solidarities, and ideas of self-determination and autonomy which underlie national identity. However, the use of national identity as the foundation of citizenship involves several challenges such as of that national identity in any single case is associated with a particular history and a past which may be exclusive, especially of those potential new citizens who now seek membership. National identity can never be 'innocent'. Citizenship in Malaysia is becoming a challenge for a communicative community that is fearful of the threat of

normalization, exclusion, and silence. All these features aim to investigate how ethnic diversity in Malaysia fosters a sense of overlapping and disputed 'nation-of-intent'. The impact of several forms of competing 'nation-of-intent' and social cohesion therefore influences citizenship in Malaysia.

In general, citizenship is not a widely recognized term in Malaysia. People do not have a good understanding of what it means to be a person, rather than one of the subjects of the monarch. Citizenship is not so much a term that has played a central role in Malaysia's political past. Citizenship in diverse Malaysia needs to consider a few issues including the explicit ideal of inclusive citizenship needs to be developed for diverse Malaysians. Diversity must be given public status and integrity, and Malaysia needs to establish a modern social and cultural agenda capable of cultivating or nurturing ethnic identities. The majority and minority groups in Malaysia must both have space for development, but in relation to each other. This suggests that the form and content of the official 'nation-of-intent' can be defined or redefined through dialogue and democratic decision, further indicating that it is a highly fluid notion. Perhaps, it can be described that the main elements in the revitalization of the Malaysian notion through 'academic analyses of its national identity and its redefinition to accommodate cultural and territorial minorities.

However, if nationality is simple to be determined politically, what differentiates it from citizenship? For example, there is a sense in which the past always constraints the present- present identities are built out of the materials that are handed down and not started from scratch. Among the Chinese and Indian in Malaysia. There is an existing of different 'nation-of-intent' in which, those who want to insist that membership of a national community is not an open choice versus those who seek to form an understanding of nation as a matter of choice. This is because Malaysia's national identity is deeply rooted in its political culture, established over decades and many of the key institutions make-up the Malaysian culture, such as the monarchy, Parliament, and the Constitution.

Ethnic Politics and Marginalization in Malaysia

The understanding of 'nation-of-intent' requires approaches of peripheral communities in Malaysia navigate their positions as 'outsiders' within the national framework. Concepts such as 'peripheral governance', 'ethnic politics, and 'citizenship' provide a fundamental understanding of the mechanisms that shape marginalization in Malaysia. These perspectives are contextualized through Malaysia's historical experiences of colonialism and its post-colonial efforts to unify a plural society. As such, citizens 'living on the margins' often experience a lack of representation, which affects their citizenship and access to state resources.

The concept of peripheral governance illustrates how communities outside the center of political power are often overlooked in state policies. For example, this issue is relevant for rural and indigenous communities in states of Sabah and Sarawak. Governance models often fail to account for the unique needs of these communities, leading to exclusionary citizenship practices where peripheral communities have limited political voice (Hamel, 2024). Furthermore, the political landscape in Malaysia is deeply intertwined with ethnic identities, where policies often prioritize the majority Malays at the expense of other communities. This emphasis on ethnic categorization impacts national identity formation, where peripheral groups are marginalized not only geographically but also ethnically. Policies often display an attempt to support majority groups while inadvertently solidify minority marginalization. There is a layer of complexity with regards to the role of multiculturalism in shaping citizenship. Ideally, the framework of 'multicultural citizenship' should encompass the rights of all ethnic groups. However, the realities in Malaysia show disparities in the rights afforded to minority communities. The state's approach to multiculturalism display state policies that endorse diversity rhetorically but often fall short in practice, particularly for marginalized communities.

Critical historical insights into how Malaysia's colonial and post-colonial periods shaped current issues of marginalization are crucial since ethnic communities were often assigned specific economic roles, with Malays in rural agriculture, Chinese in urban trade, and Indians in plantation work during colonial times. This segregation created a socio-economic hierarchy that persists in contemporary Malaysia, affecting both citizenship rights and access to resources. This shows how post-colonial nation-building efforts aimed at creating a unified identity have frequently struggled to integrate diverse cultural backgrounds equitably. This historical backdrop helps explain current citizenship challenges in peripheral areas, where marginalized groups

are often excluded from mainstream economic and social opportunities. Policies that favor the majority Malay population have left ethnic minorities, such as the Orang Asli as marginalized citizens, with limited access to social benefits and political representation. This framework of historical marginalization reinforces what Hamel terms as 'peripheral governance' where certain communities remain on the margins of policy decisions (Cheah, 2002).

It is essential to understand the sociocultural lens on marginalization and belonging, relevant to Malaysia's complex ethnic landscape. The concepts of 'social marginalization' and 'citizenship and belonging' resonate with the experiences of Malaysia's peripheral communities. Minority groups navigate mainstream expectations and ethnic identity that is pertinent in Malaysia, where ethnic minorities often feel pressured to assimilate into a Malay-centric 'nation-of-intent'. This can lead to a sense of alienation for communities that do not align with the state's definitions of national 'nation-of-intent'. The emphasis on 'belonging' versus 'exclusion' provides a framework to examine how minority groups in Malaysia negotiate their 'nation-of-intent'. For example, states like Sabah and Sarawak, indigenous communities often prioritize their regional identities over a unified Malaysian 'nation-of-intent'. This tension reflects broader issues in national policies, where citizenship is often tied to ethnic and cultural conformity rather than inclusive multiculturalism.

Peripheral Communities Challenges at A Glimpse

In Malaysia, the indigenous *Orang Asli* have faced significant marginalization through land encroachment and limited political representation. Despite being recognized as Bumiputera, they do not receive the same benefits as Malays. Multiculturalism in Malaysia highlights this discrepancy, discussing how policies aimed at indigenous rights often exclude the *Orang Asli* from meaningful support. The lack of access to land rights, healthcare, and education underscores the ways in which citizenship is unevenly distributed among Malaysia's indigenous groups. The indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak Sabah as another example, experience unique marginalization due to geographical distance and federal-state tensions (Zawawi, 2008). The federal policies often overlook these states, resulting in socio-economic disparities. These peripheral communities experience a disconnect from central policies, impacting their citizenship experience and leading to calls for greater regional autonomy (Cheah, 2002). This is followed by the ethnic minority Indians in Malaysia, particularly descendants of plantation workers who have long faced socio-economic challenges Malaysia's affirmative action policies for Bumiputera (unintentionally sidelined non-Malay minorities) have limited economic mobility for the Indian communities. This marginalization affects their access to education, employment, and social services, reinforcing systemic barriers to citizenship and belonging. (Loh, 1992).

Emphasis on peripheral communities is ambivalent with regards to citizenship distinction between the 'majority-minority' communities as most of the minority communities are located at the rural areas of Malaysia. Studies have pointed out different practices of citizenship in rural areas, ranging from significant differences in the standard of living between urban and rural areas to the access to certain services and infrastructures, including welfare rights (Yarwood, 2017). These practices of citizenship are heavily dependent on citizens' infrastructures such as services, employment, and transport to achieve full citizenship rights. Therefore, the poor, disabled or young people might become trapped by rural localities, prohibiting them from achieving their full citizenship. This is because rural areas might promote 'semi-citizenship', rather than a 'full-fledged citizenship'. (Cresswel, 2009)

It is important to focus on how citizenship can contribute to mitigating the challenges of 'citizenship' and its asymmetries among the peripheral communities in Malaysia, who have 'relatively' limited visibility and relevance. Social and welfare rights still appear to be central concerns among these peripheral communities such as adequate access to education and healthcare, and clean drinking water (for many areas, still) by the federal government which aligns to Marshall's 'Theory of Citizenship' (1950) that focuses on social rights as the final stage of citizenship development. Social measures are needed to promote a more equal status among citizens that eventually mitigates challenges of marginalization in Malaysia which is characterized by deep diversity and dimensions of ethnicity, culture, class, region, and religion. Thus, the significant contested 'nation-of-intent' among the peripheral communities, namely the minority Indians, *Orang Asli* and the indigenous communities of Sabah and Sarawak who have shared experiences in history of the country is important to the analysis of citizenship and challenges of marginalization in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Malaysia is a state without a nation (with many forms 'nation-of-intent') and effort must include ideas to the nation at large when promoting the notion of 'equality in diversity', and not just 'unity in diversity'. There must be an explicit citizenship and clear-cut statement of intent about its vision and direction of peripheral communities. This is because the concept of citizenship in Malaysia prompts only the 'nation-of intent' of the majority community, although there are other forms of 'nation-of-intent'. The presence of plurality of 'nation-of-intent' demonstrates dissenting voices are present and heard, within and without government. Rethinking of citizenship and the concept of 'nation-of-intent' that is inclusive of all ethnic communities towards an inclusive citizenship will address challenges of marginalization among peripheral communities in Malaysia. By recognizing the unique needs of peripheral communities, Malaysia can work towards a more equal and inclusive society that fully embodies its diverse ethnic and cultural heritage.

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