Was multicultural integration more successful than assimilation in the independent Southeast Asian states' attempts to achieve national unity?

Every nascent state strives to achieve national unity, characterised by territorial integrity, social stability and common identity. Across Southeast Asia, two general approaches emerged: assimilation sought to impose a dominant culture onto minorities, while integration promoted a multicultural social fabric that embraced diverse identities. In most countries, neither approach achieved national unity in its entirety: while assimilation fared better at creating a central national identity, integration proved better at averting minority challenges to social stability and territorial integrity, the bedrock of unity. Ultimately, integration was the more successful strategy because it was inevitably more accommodative in implementation and was primarily used in conditions where unity was inherently easier to achieve.

Integrative approaches were not always more successful: integration's attempt to protect the cultural spaces of diverse groups counterproductively reinforced ethnic differences. Comparatively, assimilation—with its heavy emphasis on establishing one dominant culture—more successfully forged a shared national identity. In Malaysia, accommodating different communities led to ethnic compartmentalisation: vernacular private schools were allowed which protected Chinese and Indian culture but reinforced ethnic segregation in education, limiting opportunities for inter-ethnic interaction. Hence, a 2000 Universiti Malaya survey found "very little inter-ethnic mixing" among students, precluding any common Malaysian identity. Comparatively, Thailand's populace was firmly assimilated under the national ideology of "Nation, Religion, King": King Bhumibol was so universally revered that he successfully forced leaders Thanom and Suchinda to step down in 1973 and 1992, demonstrating his central place in Thai identity. Further, the promotion of Buddhism to hill tribes under the Thammacarik and Thammathut programmes in the mid-1960s successfully converted many to Buddhism, with nearly every province in the region being majority-Buddhist by 1970, indicating a shared Buddhist identity. Similarly, the Javanese concept of *gotong royong* was successfully established as national culture in Indonesia—both Sukarno and Suharto attached the phrase to key policies (e.g. the 1957 Gotong Royong Cabinet, 1960 Gotong Royong Parliament and 1968 BIMAS Gotong Royong), demonstrating popular buy-in. Further, Bahasa Indonesia—widely considered a strategy to facilitate acceptance of the dominant culture by avoiding overt Javanese domination—enhanced Indonesian identity as it became spoken by over 80% of Indonesians by 1990. Thus, assimilation's strong focus on creating a dominant culture has forged a

national identity—a key marker of national unity—while integration often reinforced ethnic divides instead.

Further, integration often incited backlash and resistance from majorities when they felt their dominance was threatened by multiculturalism, while assimilation better preserved social stability by assuring them of their cultural dominance. In Burma, U Nu's attempt to balance the teaching of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam incensed the *sangha,* compromising social stability when over 8000 monks protested the policy in Mandalay. In Indonesia, Sukarno's integration of the Chinese-dominated PKI into politics via his NASAKOM Cabinet exacerbated anti-Chinese sentiments, leading to pogroms against the Chinese minority in Makassar, Medan and Lombok that killed 2000 from 1965-66. This widespread social instability was only quelled after Suharto introduced a series of assimilative policies in 1967: Chinese script was banned from public display and Chinese were forced to adopt Indonesian-sounding names. Hence, it was assimilation, not integration, that pacified majority anger, delivering three decades of New Order stability. In Malaysia, the PAP's advocacy for a "Malaysian Malaysia"—an integrative vision that would remove the favourable admission quotas Malays received for educational institutions and the civil service—sparked Malay anger, leading to destabilising and deadly race riots in 1964. Further, the accommodative use of English as an official administrative language, alongside the freedom of worship for all religions, frustrated many Malays who desired greater Malay dominance, contributing to the 1969 riots that undermined social stability. Conversely, this anger was soothed by a policy of official assimilation, evinced by the 1971 Constitutional Amendment that made challenges to Malays' special position punishable as sedition. This preserved social stability: Malaysia has not seen riots ever since. Therefore, unlike integration which erodes the privileges of the majority, assimilation entrenches their dominant position, preventing destabilising resentment that erodes unity.

However, even as integration sometimes provoked majorities, it better preserved social stability overall by protecting the cultural space and rights of different ethnicities, significantly reducing minority resistance. Comparatively, assimilation often abrogated minority identities by imposing a dominant culture, leading to marginalised minorities asserting their distinctiveness. Singapore's formally multicultural approach granted numerous protections to minorities, including freedom of worship guaranteed by the Constitution, the recognition of 4 official languages including Malay and Tamil, and the 1969 Bilingual Education Policy which enabled students to study their "mother tongue" in schools. Further, inter-ethnic mixing is facilitated by the 1989 Ethnic Integration Policy which introduced racial quotas in housing estates. Such multiculturalism has preserved social stability, with no major protests or ethnic violence since 1964. Conversely, Thailand attempted to assimilate the hill tribes: the Ministry

of Education seized control of all schools in the area in 1967, conducting education fully in Thai which led to poor performance among hill tribes. Further, the government forcibly resettled many Hmong people into the lowlands to dilute their ethnic identity, leading to the 1968 Meo Revolt that compromised social stability. Similarly, the Philippines eroded Cordilleran identity with their majority-dominated national unity efforts. While education sought to be integrative, school curricula often reflected a Christian bias, making it assimilative in practice. Further, indigenous Cordilleran languages were made auxiliary to Filipino, created based on Tagalog spoken in Manila. This fuelled Cordilleran resentment, leading to protests and armed resistance by the Cordilleran People's Liberation Army. Such destabilising revolts demonstrate how assimilation could undermine national unity when attempts to efface minority culture were met with pushback. Comparatively, integration better protected minority cultures and preserved social stability.

Even for the most intransigent minorities, accommodative concessions that protected their ethnic identities were still more successful in quelling minority resistance. Comparatively, coercive assimilation often radicalised resistance into separatism, threatening the territorial integrity on which national unity is founded. The Burmese government pursued aggressive assimilation in the Frontier Areas, enforcing the use of Burmese within government businesses in 1952 and making Buddhism the state religion in 1961. This abrogation of indigenous identities led to a wave of separatism, with 10% of the nation controlled by ethnic insurgents by 1962. Hence, assimilation made territorial integrity elusive for nascent Burma, let alone national unity. The Philippines transmigrated Christians into Mindanao, eroding the Moro culture when they constituted merely 19% of the Mindanao population in 1990, down from 76% in 1903. Moro resentment culminated in a prolonged separatist struggle under the Moros National Liberation Front, which was only successfully resolved using accommodative policies: Aquino's 1989 establishment of the Autonomous Regions in Muslim Mindanao and Ramos's 1996 promise to return Muslim ancestral lands maintained over a decade of peace. Similarly, Indonesian assimilation in Aceh—via attempts to control Muslim clerics in the province and a policy of transmigration to dilute Acehnese identity—only sparked greater dissent, culminating in the 1976 formation of the Free Aceh Movement and three decades of insurgency, threatening territorial integrity. Regional separatism only ended in 2005 after Jakarta made numerous accommodations, giving the conservative Aceh special autonomy to practise sharia law. Hence, integrative concessions were far more successful at preserving territorial and national unity, whereas the coercive implementation of assimilation often exacerbated separatist tendencies.

Across Southeast Asia, Vietnam stands out as an exception: the unique confluence of its ethnic homogeneity (87% Kinh), unifying communist ideology and lengthy decolonisation

struggle has allowed it to achieve the dual objectives of social stability and a common identity. However, most states face an inevitable trade-off between these irreconcilable goals: the assimilative imposition of a dominant culture compromises social stability by provoking minority resistance, while integration protects diverse communities at the expense of a common identity. Ultimately though, integration is the generally more successful strategy because territorial unity and social stability are far more foundational elements of national unity: a common identity cannot be built when minority resistance and separatism are rife, as seen in Burma where severe ethnic insurgencies have precluded any semblance of national unity.

That said, the success of any approach to national unity was less a result of whether it was officially assimilative or integrative, but rather how accommodative it was in implementation. While the coercive imposition of assimilation provoked insurgencies in Burma, Aceh and Mindanao, the accommodative implementation of *officially* assimilative policies successfully engendered unity in Malaysia because it was effectively similar to the naturally accommodative multiculturalism. Further, integration was also relatively more successful because governments only pursued the strategy when they had favourable demographic and historical contexts that made integration viable. Malaysia's accommodative approach towards the Chinese was built on existing Malay political dominance and Chinese economic power which made mutual accommodation natural and palatable. Singapore pursued integration because its overwhelmingly immigrant population, with no prior attachment to the land, would be more amenable to adopting multiculturalism. Comparatively, assimilation was often implemented in challenging, fractious contexts where integration was never possible to begin with: Burma had to assimilate the Karens because they had already fought against the Burmans in three Anglo-Burmese Wars and rejected Aung San's attempts at integration in Panglong. Thus, while integrative policies better achieved national unity, they were often used when this unity was inherently easier to achieve in the first place.