Pluralism in "Old Societies and New States": Emerging ASEAN Contexts

By Amyn B. Sajoo. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994, Pp. 103.

Pluralism has emerged as an important aspect of political life since the advent of liberal democracy. It is considered essential for the success of modern states. It indicates the existence of various conflicting ideologies, conceptions, values, and purposes of human life at a social level and the plurality of autonomous groups and organizations at a political level. The existence of modern states and the successful operation of democracy depends upon how they accommodate ethno-cultural diversities within the broad framework of their social ethos and

how they develop state mechanisms to safeguard the interests of all groups to ensure the well-being of the masses.

The book under review describes, in a limited manner, the features and problems of pluralism in Southeast Asia. The region exhibits the traits of a plural society where different groups and communities live side by side, maintaining their separate identities. Cultural interaction and civilized dialogue take place without major tension. The countries of the region, particularly members of ASEAN, have concentrated their efforts on economic development and proceeded along the path of industrialization as a means to that. They have succeeded in their attempt and distinguished themselves from other countries in the continent.

Southeast Asian countries are "old societies but new nations." As such the traditional ethos, cultural identities, and religious values are considered not commensurate with the trends of political modernization and pluralism. The encounter sometimes creates contradiction and tension. The author is quite conscious of the problem. He cites relevant literature and describes divergent views of Western scholars on the issue. He should certainly be praised for providing a lucid description of the Islamic heritage in from pluralist a perspective. He successfully explains, with suitable examples, how Islam tolerated the divergent ideologies and cultural traits from the very beginning of its emergence, and allowed them, with all protection and patronage, to co-exist. He also points out the tension between Islam and modernism within the group itself—the struggle against authoritarianism and the implementation of a human right paradigm. He thus describes the relation of Islam with pluralism. The imbalance between "church and state" in sociopolitical traits of Europe finds occidental secularism as an adequate alternative to the political problem. He equates the concept with "Ummah and state" and finds distance between them but observes that "secular humanism" is equally relevant to resolve the issue in the Muslim context, where recourse can be had to Islam's own humanist ethos, thereby providing a synthesis of its tradition and sociocultural diversity. It can balance modernist demands with societal tenets. The author's creativity and problem-solving abilities are praiseworthy.

Further, the book analyzes two Muslim countries (Indonesia and Malaysia) in which pluralism operates and where ethnic, cultural, and political diversities are accommodated in the sociopolitical milieu. These societies try to integrate "national and universal perspectives" in response to the challenge of various diversities. Indonesia is home to the largest number of Muslims in the world (180 million). The minority (10 percent) are Christians, Hindu Balinese, Buddhists, and adherents of cultic and animist religions. The creation of an Islamic state was considered problematic, and Sukarno's vision of Pancasila materialized into a state that is governed by five principles: belief in one God, nationalism, humanism, social justice, and democracy. After initial turbulence, it has strengthened in the course of time.

Pluralism in Indonesia, according to the author, has three significant features. First, the ethnic groups including modernist Muslims, Chinese, and Christians share a similar view about the new order and consider Pancasila, in one way or another, as beneficial to all. Second, Pancasila is considered appropriate to the Islamic ethos. Third, Muslims and other ethnocultural interests are combined to develop "civil society."

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural society comprising 18 million people, of which 59 percent are Malays and other indigenous (bumiputra) peoples, 31 percent are Chinese, and 9 percent are Indians. Malays are mostly Muslims. The independence movement culminated in the emergence of Malaya in 1957. The Malay Federation was formed in 1963. The politics of the region was governed by the coalition of three main groups, dominated by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). In 1970, after a short period of turmoil, the country developed a new ideology, Rukunegara, to govern the state. Like Pancasila, it consisted of general principles: belief in God, loyalty to king and country, constitutionality, the rule of law, and good behavior and morality which should be observed in every walk of life. It was the foundation of a liberal society in which various groups, with all of their cultural traits, could integrate to achieve national unity and progress. It also assured the fair and equitable distribution of the nation's wealth, offering assistance to disadvantaged groups to help them compete. Rukunegara stressed national unity. As such, democratic traits were not allowed to promote racialism and destroy the fabric of democracy itself. Later on, Tun Abdul Razak, then the prime minister, presented to Parliament the plan for the overall development of the country called the New Economic Policy (NEP). It encouraged Malays to participate in the development of the country and into sharing the benefits of national modernization. The state took a new shape in the form of democracy, which was (according to Tun Abdul Razak) "suitable for a developing country with different communities." The MCA leader was not satisfied with it. but admitted that it was "better than no democracy at all." Thus, a grand coalition under Malay primacy came into being and became popular under Barisan National, which succeeded in getting a majority in elections from 1974 to 1990. The success of Malaysian society has its ability to manage, in the federal format, diversity without minority alienation while maintaining Malay hegemony.

The book also discusses the pluralist trends and their prospects in ASEAN, which are engaged in modernizing their socioeconomic order to meet the challenge of global transformation. They face conflicting situations in order to find a compromise between local ethos and liberal, democratic, pluralist, and global ideologies. Consequently, the ethnocultural minorities could not get an equal share in the privileges of the state. Sometimes their existence with all of their traits seems to be difficult. Pluralism and liberal democracy could not be implemented in a true sense. Their operation, in the strange soil, faces resistance and creates imbalances. Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, and other members of ASEAN are, somehow, trailing in the same boat.

The sociopolitical realities of ASEAN raise certain crucial issues and challenge the theoretical bases of modern social sciences. The globalization of human life in general, and political modernization in particular, when implemented in non-Western situations, produced different results and in most cases created imbalances that threatened the integrity of concerned societies. The particular case of liberal democracy and pluralism shows that they never work and operate in a real sense and true spirit, at least in non-Western societies. If anyone enforces and applies it in the true sense, I am sure it will endanger the very existence of those societies. The problem is that these societies cannot modify local traditions according to global ideologies which, if accommodated in local ethos according to their preferences, lose relevance and become dysfunctional.

There is a misconception about Western paradigms, theories, and doctrines of human and social life. They are considered "ideal," having universalistic traits. They may be ideal because they accommodate the ethos, priorities, and preferences of the West, but their universality is challenged in other soils. The processes of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization reveal the above truth. The same is true with pluralist democracy. It is implemented in non-Western societies but has taken other shapes. It should be studied in view of its relevance to change the fate of human beings and nations. If it jeopardizes national interest and promotes self-interest, it cannot be beneficial to humanity.

The Southeast Asian countries are home to the largest population of Muslims in the world where Islam is a social reality. Islam as a complete and adequate system of life exhibits tolerance, respects others' culture, safeguards others' existence, and guarantees others' rights as long as its basic structure is not damaged. Islam, either in the government or outside the government, does not accommodate alien pressures and absorb alien ethos at the cost of its own doctrine. The Muslim situation in Southeast Asia should be analyzed in this perspective. Muslims in Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore will always resist any trend that does not permit them to survive with all of their traits. Similarly, Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei cannot leave their basic traits in accommodating alien ethos. If effort is made to do so, the obvious result will be tension and turmoil. Pluralism has to operate in the region cautiously and meaningfully, otherwise it cannot deliver good. Robert A. Dahl once remarked, "pluralism is one aspect of a general dilemma in political life: Autonomy or control? Or to ask a less simple-minded question: How much autonomy and how much control?" This applies to Muslim situations where we have to decide how we have to compromise with modern pressures, in what way, and to what extent. In fact, we have to seek a meaningful balance between autonomy and control.

The book is interesting and valuable because it explains how pluralist trends operate in the region and challenge the local ethos to accommodate global pressures. Further, it reveals how pluralist traits succeed in developing civil society. It stimulates us to conduct in-depth studies of the problem in the region.

Jamil Farooqui
Department of Social Anthropology
International Islamic University
Selangor, Darul Ehsan, Malaysia