EuroSEAS Conference 2021
Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic

7-10 September 2021

Panel Type

Single Session (1 x 90 min)

Panel Title

Identity Politics in Southeast Asia: Decolonial Approaches Toward Constructing the Pluriverse

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Panel Abstract

This panel interrogates the origins and dynamics of recent forms of political contention around identity in contemporary Southeast Asia through a decolonial theoretical lens. The panel adopts a broad interpretation of political contention that includes oppositional activism, collective action, social movements or street protests. The panel aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the coloniality of power and knowledge, a key concept in the decolonial school of thought, is implicated in recent examples of political contention over issues of race, religion, gender or sexuality in the postcolonial countries of Southeast Asia. Through the empirical examples provided in the papers of this panel, we demonstrate the operationalisation of the coloniality of power – i.e., the notion that prevailing political, economic and social structures of modernity that were formed during the era of Western colonialism is constantly being reproduced and updated under the rhetoric of modernity and progress in ways that maintain unequal social hierarchies and power differentials in postcolonial countries, even though explicit colonialism as a political order has long come to an end. The panel seeks to answer fundamental questions on why and how these seemingly intractable identity differences contribute to political contention in the different national contexts studied, with some identities favoured while others marginalised. We also reflect on the benefits and limits of decolonial approaches, which emphasise the alterity and multiplicity of knowledge production, in the quest to de-marginalise oppressed groups toward the construction of more equal and pluriverse societies. The panel will convene junior and senior scholars of Southeast Asia to address these questions from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Paper Abstracts

Auto-Orientalism in Contemporary Indonesian Islamic-themed Films: In Search of an Exemplary Muslim Subjectivity and *Ummah*

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This paper locates the coloniality of power maintained by global capital and geopolitical forces in commercially oriented Islamic-themed films and thus reveals their roles in shaping popular cultural discourses in Indonesia. It investigates self-Orientalising tendencies present in the blockbusters *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love) and *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* (99 Lights in the Sky of Europe). In doing so, this paper engages the ideas of the "captive mind", "intellectual imperialism" (Alatas, 1974 & 2000) and Neo-Orientalism (Samiei, 2010; Sa'di, 2020) to explain the psychological and structural makeups that sustain and perpetuate Orientalist biases. On the one hand, the films purport to replace denigrating forms of Muslim representations in global mainstream media. Yet, the cultural claims of an irreconcilable tension between "Islam" and the "West" and an inherent dissimilarity between Indonesian and Arab Muslims control the film narratives in ways that feed into both Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist imaginations. Through the concept "Auto-Orientalism" (Lie, 1996), this paper argues that Orientalism as a style of thought is not confined to the Europeans and can be internalised and perpetuated by the colonial subjects themselves. The paper builds its argument by analysing the key historical processes and the domestic and foreign policies that accompanied the development of Islamic film genre in Indonesia. In doing so, this paper highlights the enabling conditions that contribute to the persistence of Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist discourses; one of which is Indonesia's Islamic moderation discourse propelled by the Indonesian state via the largest civil-based Muslim organisations – Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Against such backdrop,

this paper contends that far from being an ideologically separate institution, the Indonesian film industry is strategically situated within various and variable political and economic forces.

Decolonising Feminisms: Islamic Feminists and Islamist Women Activists in Malaysia
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This paper adopts a decolonial relational lens to study the larger patterns of differential power relations that shape Muslim women activists' perspectives and experiences in a politically polarised Malaysian context. One contributing factor to political polarisation in Malaysia is the repeated emotive trope of a secular-versus-religious dichotomy that is reinforced through political discourse and media frames, especially when contentious issues involving Islamic law, often times related to gender, capture public attention. Based on interviews with Muslim women activists from self-proclaimed ideologically different advocacy groups, the paper argues that the analytic bifurcation of Muslim women activists into "liberal/progressive/moderate" feminists and "conservative" Islamists along secular-religious lines is problematic without an interrogation of the coloniality of power and knowledge that continues to pervade not only the Malaysian context but also the global context. The paper critically examines the relationship between Muslim women activists' calls for reform, the parameters of reform forged by coloniality's demand for conformity (i.e., in accordance with Western modes of thought and knowledge), and the state's imperatives to forge a homogenous Malay Muslim majority populace to maintain power. In what ways are the ideologically different Muslim women's activist groups complicit in upholding structures of oppression, and in what ways are they resisting them? In what ways are they intertwined with each other, perhaps in ways unbeknownst to them, which unsettles the binaries of the "secular" and the "religious", and "politics" and "religion"?

Everyone's Decolonising: The Hegemony of Decolonial Discourses and the Construction of Alternate Hegemonies in Malaysia
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Nicholas Chan, *Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge*

Scholars tend to view the failure of decolonisation in terms of stasis; in that coloniality lingers in social divisions, political praxis, political economies, and epistemologies. However, this angle tends to be laden with normative presuppositions as the actors recognised as doing 'decolonisation' are often those associated with specific moral and ideological commitments, while the rest will be seen as 'colonised', if not doing 'fake' decolonisation in the form of tokenism or nativism. We argue that such views about decolonisation, even as it takes the form of a hegemonic frame, suffers from empirical limitations. Its reliance on a thinker and thought-centric methodology hinders a recognition that a pluriverse is actually in the making, one that capitalises on the decolonial discourse (and indeed leveraging on democratic methods) instead of being a victim of it. Using the case of right-wing Islamist groups in Malaysia, we demonstrate that the translation of decolonial discourses into local socio-political advocacy is not simply a case of nativism (or reverse-orientalism), but rather an agentic process that contains innovative and strategic modes of participation, networking, and articulation which borrows from, yet also subverts the decolonial discourse on some of its normative commitments. For example, ISMA (Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia) and ISMA-led MACSA (Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations) have appropriated 'decolonising' idioms to justify their racist and exclusivist statements. Paradoxically, illiberal forces have 'abused'

supposedly liberating decolonial discourses to silent liberal voices. We argue that these maneuverings should be acknowledged as the operations of a pluriverse and that it is much productive, both scholarly and politically, to *engage the pluriverse as it is in the social world* instead of what it should be in the intellectual realm. In other words, the ostensible hegemony of decolonial discourses is indeed the beginning of the pluriverse, even as it drives identity politics to more unpredictable and pernicious grounds.

Decolonising the Terrorism Industry: Indonesia
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Over the last few decades, discussion of decolonisation and decolonial thinking has gained much traction in many countries. Scholars and students have called on their institutions to decolonise their curriculums and argued for why their respective disciplines need to be decolonised. They have recognised that the knowledge produced by the social sciences remains Western-centric. However, unlike the other social sciences, the terrorism industry, on the other hand, has not reflected on its Western centrism. This situation is especially the case with the security side of the terrorism industry, which is the most visible and arguably the most problematic side. By adopting a decolonial approach and Indonesia as a case study, this paper highlights some of the ways through which the terrorism industry reproduces Western centrism. The paper concludes by raising several issues regarding the role that the industry plays in Indonesia and urges scholars to research them.