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The mentality of "Us" and "Others": The perception of identity in Aceh

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Abstract: The perception of Acehnese identity is crucial for understanding both the conflict between the rebel group of Aceh and the Indonesian government, and also the implementation of Sharia law as a result of peace agreement between both parties. Many papers have discussed the causes of conflict in Aceh as a combination of political grievances, economic grievances, and human rights violations the Acehnese society has endured during the three-decades long of conflict. This paper, however, seeks to highlight the role of identity as the main struggle in the conflict. The conflict between the rebel group of Aceh and the Indonesian government revolved around the conception of nation-building and identity. The differences in understanding what a nation should be led to the growth of grievances and conflict between both parties. It also affected on how identity is perceived by the Acehnese society. Before the peace agreement was reached in 2005, a strong sense of Acehnese identity was being threatened by the Indonesian government's programs which fed the tensions between both parties leading to conflict. After the peace agreement was reached and Aceh was then allowed to implement Sharia law, the perception of identity in Aceh became more Islamic and created restrictions for people with different identities, specifically in terms of religion.

Keywords: Aceh, Sharia law, rebel group, conflict, Islam, identity, Indonesia

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Introduction

Aceh is a province in the most western part of Indonesia and is known as the only province in Indonesia where Sharia law is used as its legal system. The implementation of Sharia law is a result of a long period of conflict between the rebel group in Aceh, called Gerakan Aceh Merdeka/Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government. GAM was born in 1976 to demand Aceh's independence from Indonesia. The reasoning behind the push for independence came from a long-standing belief that Aceh is 'distinct' from the rest of the country historically and culturally. Tensions also grew over the spoils of the province's immense natural resources. (Shah and Cardozo, 2014, p.2) The political actions taken by the Indonesian government were believed to be a detriment to the welfare and development of Aceh and the Acehnese people.

The conflict escalated and the grievances of both parties increased due to the non-cooperative behaviour between both parties and the hostile nature of both parties' perception towards each other. GAM perceived the Indonesian government and the Javanese people as threats towards the Acehnese identity. On the other hand, the Indonesian government saw the Acehnese people as a part of the Indonesian diverse nature of identity while at the same time perceived GAM as a threat to the stability of Indonesian identity. Social and political transformation were needed, as the Acehnese society felt the lack of access and control on both matters, but, unfortunately, it led to a deepening of the exclusionary nature of the two sides. Many actions had been taken by Indonesian government in order to reduce the insurgency from the rebel group and to stop the conflict. However, there had been mishaps during the negotiations which led to more insurgency from both sides. After the dictatorship era ended in 1998, Indonesia was in a very unstable political condition. This can be seen from the secession of East Timor which gave the rebel group in Aceh a momentum to work even more aggressively on their demand for independence from Indonesia. This paper will focus on the role of the "Us" versus "Others" mentality that was central in the conflict and how the mentality still plays a role in Aceh to establish its identity through the implementation of Sharia law.

The discussion will begin with the debates on ethnic identity between primordialists and constructivists by highlighting the differences between their arguments on what ethnic identity is. Following the discussion on ethnic identity, the explanation on how identity plays a role in Aceh will be elaborated by dividing it into two separate parts: before the peace agreement was signed in 2004 and after it was signed. As a part of the peace agreement, the

implementation of Sharia law in Aceh became the realisation of autonomy offered by the Indonesian government. The analysis will provide the highlights on how identity has played a role in Aceh, during the conflict and in the period of implementation of Sharia law.

Debates on Ethnic Identity: Primordial or Constructed?

In order to understand the "Us" and "Others" mentality within the discourse of Aceh, it is important to understand the academic discussions that revolve around it. The "Us" and "Others mentality stems from how one sees the origin of ethnic identity. One may argue that ethnic identity is something fixed, that one is born with. Others may argue that it is a result of social construction. Both perceptions have different ways of understanding what ethnic identity is, how one belongs to certain ethnic identity groups and how one has to act based on their ethnic identity.

There is a tension in understanding ethnic identity in whether it is as something primordial or something constructed. It is important to understand that identity is very critical in the construction of war and conflict due to two reasons: (1) war and conflict require a clearly identifiable enemy of "Others" against "Us"; and (2) identity plays a central role in defining and structuring both the interests and the norms of the behaviour of actors. (Jackson, 2009, p.177) The perceptions of identity, both primordialist and constructivist, point out how to understand who is "Us" and who is "Others".

Ethnic identity is, based on the primordial view, something "given" from a history of kinship and connections which makes ethnic identity "fixed" and "natural". It stems from the fact that someone is being born into a particular religious community, having a particular racial feature, and speaking a particular language. (Geertz, 1973, pp.259–260) Primordialists believe that particular social categories are fixed by human nature rather than by social convention and practice. These beliefs in the naturalness of a social category might be rooted in beliefs about alleged implications of biology, for example gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, or about theology and morality. (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, p.848) Conflict between two or more ethnic groups, therefore, is inevitable because of unchanging, essential characteristics of the members of these categories. (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, p.849) Primordialists argue that ethnic conflict is inevitable due to the differences of ethnic identities within society. The frictions

between ethnic identities occur due to the naturally-given differences they have, and conflict or violence is seen as a form of interactions between those groups.

Primordialists see identity as a "historically developed givenness" of which membership of a primordial community is assigned to an individual and is considered to be hereditary, like a caste but also a religion, reflexive, universal and also eternal. (Bačová, 1998, p.32) It means that we, as individuals, are assigned to certain identity characteristics from the day we were born and we naturally belong to the groups with similar characteristics to those we possess. The primordialist argument suggests that ethnic identity is collectively exclusive; there are different groups with different ethnic identities who exclusively group themselves with characteristically-similar people. This implies the creation of "Us-Others" perceptions in the society. It suggests that due to the differences between ethnic groups, and that every individual is bound to their ethnic group, intolerance and hatred toward "Others" are natural. Clifford Geertz argues that these lifelong relations can, under particular conditions, lead to conflicts with other human loyalties, and especially that they can destroy civic society. (Bačová, 1998, p.32) It is believed, by primordialists, that it is an obligation for every individual to protect their ethnic group, who share the common interests and common characteristics, from threats of "others".

The perception of identity as socially constructed has been growing stronger in academic discussions more so than the primordialist view of identity. Constructivists argue that identity is neither fixed nor given, but it is context-dependent, highly malleable, constructed and constantly evolving in response to external events and processes, such as immigration and globalisation. (Jackson, 2005, pp.147–171; Jackson, 2009, pp.172–190; Chandra, 2012, pp.2–44; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000, pp.1–47; Fearon and Laitin, 2000, pp.845–877; Bačová, 1998, pp.29–43) Rogers Brubaker argues that ethnic groups are the products of historical processes. (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000, p.21) For example, one mode that is a staple of African Studies is the reifying of cultural differences through imposed colonial identifications. One's membership into certain group identities will evolve and change over time due to the fact that it is a product of human actions. Paul Brass gives an explanation that someone's ethnic identities can also evolve due to some conditions. (Brass, 1991, p.16) In order to support Brass's proposal that ethnic identities can evolve, we can see that through the phenomenon of interracial marriage a person can change their ethnic identity, or come to possess multiple ethnic identities.

Brass argues that ethnic identity formation is seen as a process created in the dynamics of elite competition within the boundaries determined by political and economic realities. (Brass, 1991, p.16) This argument has been discussed in many counter-arguments by constructivists on the ethnic conflict debates, that conflict occurs due to the competition over political power or economic resources, not necessarily about differences of cultural values. Ethnic conflicts arise due to one group's interpretation of the other competing parties as a threat for them to achieve their goals.

Kanchan Chandra sums up the debates between both perceptions by highlighting three propositions and counter-propositions. (Chandra, 2012, p.17) Perception of identity as primordial is defined by, at least, three propositions: that individuals have a single ethnic identity, that this ethnic identity is by its nature fixed, and that this ethnic identity is exogenous to human processes. While the counter-propositions from the constructivists are: that individuals have multiple, not single, ethnic identities, that these identities can change, and that such change, when it occurs, is the product of human process.

Pre-2004: GAM Insurgency

The three decades-long of conflict between the Indonesian government and GAM was a result of the government's failure to set up one common perception on nation-building. As a country consists of different ethnic identities, Indonesia is fragile to ethnic frictions which can lead to more severe conflicts, as it happened with Aceh and East Timor.

Before GAM started their movement, there was a movement in 1953 led by Teuku Daud Beureuh in Aceh. The movement was initiated because of the dissolution of Aceh's province and its incorporation into the North Sumatra province. (Wandi and Patria, 2015, p.4) The action to dissolve Aceh and incorporate it into another province was seen as a problem. Despite the closeness in culture with the neighbouring province of North Sumatra, Aceh believed that the Acehnese society is different than the North Sumatran society. The incorporation was also perceived as taking away Aceh's sovereignty as its own 'provincial identity'. It is known in the history that Aceh had contributed to the fight against colonisers and helped Indonesia get its independence. By incorporating Aceh to North Sumatra, the Acehnese society felt that the Indonesian government did not recognise the support Acehnese society gave during the fight against colonisers. Later, President Soekarno, the first president

of Indonesia, established a special status for Aceh in recognition to its contribution of the process of seeking for independence from the colonisers. (Schulze, 2004, pp.1–2) The special status gives Aceh the autonomy to design their own customary law (*adat*), religion, and education.

Following the insurgency led by Teuku Daud Beureuh, GAM started their movement in 1976 with the main goals of independence from the Indonesian government building their own nation. Hasan di Tiro was the leader of the movement. He was a descendant of a prominent Acehnese *ulama* family of Muslim clergy and the grandson of Teuku Cik di Tiro, a hero of the anti-colonial struggle against the Dutch colony. (Schulze, 2004, p.4) The demand for independence was rooted in the disappointment of the Acehnese society towards the Indonesian government who did not turn Indonesia into a country centred on Islamic values. However, as the movement grew, the emphasis on Islam as the base of the movement slowly faded and the focus shifted more on the political aspect of secession from Indonesia. (Aspinall, 2007, p.10)

The implementation of the special status of Aceh faced two challenges: President Soekarno's view on nation-building and President Soeharto's developmentalist programs. These challenges then contributed to the growth of GAM's grievances towards the Indonesian government. These grievances affected the Acehnese society's perception of the Indonesian government and the Javanese people as threats towards Acehnese identity. The first challenge was that Soekarno's view on nation-building, as mentioned before, did not put Islam in the centre, as he was attempting to build Indonesia as a secular nation by considering the diversity it has in terms of religion and ethnocultural backgrounds. (Huszka, 2014, p.165) It created doubts in the mind of Acehnese people because it was never properly implemented.

One thing can be taken into account that in this case, identity is seen within the primordial context rooted from the history of ancestry and Islam as a part of Acehnese identity. There were many issues that served as causes of the conflict between Aceh and Indonesian government. As mentioned earlier, the exploitation of natural resources and limitation to political access tremendously affected the dynamic of the conflict. However, the grievances started first with the different points of view of 'nation' between Acehnese society, specifically the GAM movement, who wanted to build Indonesia with Islamic values and Indonesian first President Soekarno who wanted to turn Indonesia into a secular country to accommodate the differences in Indonesia. One could argue that the initial reason for the

movement was to be able to have the liberty and control over their society based on their belief system.

The second challenge was the highly centralised developmentalist ideology of Soeharto, Indonesia's second president, who focused the development of Indonesia mainly in the Java island. (Schulze, 2004, p.1) During his presidency, Soeharto revoked the special status of Aceh which added to the resentment of Acehnese people towards the Indonesian government. The developmentalist ideology by President Soeharto at that time was marked by the massive transmigration program with the purpose of assimilation all around the Indonesian archipelago. (Nielsen, 2002, p.12) However, the problem occurred after the so-called 'assimilation' turned into the educated Javanese people taking over regional administrations in most provinces, including Aceh. As Lindorf Nielsen puts it, the increase of mono-ethnic character of Indonesian government at the time may have been a necessary legacy from the Dutch which only favoured Javanese people who could get access to Dutch education system. (Nielsen, 2002, pp.12–13) The program, however, worked against Acehnese people and local politicians which gave them a limited chance to be involved as important stakeholders. (Heiduk, 2006, p.9) Another problem which also added to the grievances was the finding of oil and gas in Arun fields in Aceh by the government's oil company Pertamina and foreign oil company Exxon-Mobil Oil. (Heiduk, 2006, pp.8–9)Under the leadership of President Soeharto, the natural resources were exploited and Acehnese people did not get a lot of benefits since all of the resources were handled by the central government.

As the movement grew stronger, it got a lot of attention and support nationally and internationally. The support given to the movement was caused by the Indonesian government's action towards resolving the conflict with only military measures. During the period of 1989-1998, Indonesian government declared Aceh as *Daerah Operasi Militer* (DOM) or military operation zone. It was to repress the GAM movement by targeting not only the members of the movement but also civilians who were suspected as supporters of the movement. (Heiduk, 2006, p.7) The counterinsurgency by the military and the government resulted into a more severe grievances as it was called as one of the biggest human rights violations in Indonesia due to the fact that by the first three years of the DOM implementation, there were more than 3,000 civilians killed by the military. (Heiduk, 2006, p.8) Throughout the DOM period, extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrest, rape and torture were committed by the military towards Acehnese people which escalated the rage against the central government and also increased the grievances which fuelled their insurgency.

The Acehnese society's demand for independence was initially rooted in the intention to stand as its own nation with its own values. Therefore, the Acehnese could have full control on politics and economy, and also to be able to have social values based on Islam. The special status on autonomy given to Aceh by President Soekarno was an opportunity to have the social values they expected. However the revoking of that status by the second president, Soeharto, was seen as the government taking their liberty to exercise their values. Also, the exploitation of natural resources became the economic, but also political, reason on why they strongly demanded for independence for Aceh. This issue also affected the perception of identity within the conflict since Acehnese people perceived Javanese people as the ones taking their prosperity and resources away. As mentioned earlier, the decisions over the natural resources in Aceh were under the control of the central government and businessmen in Java. The fact that Acehnese people did not have, and could not have, control over their own resources instigated more rage towards the Javanese people. Discrimination against Javanese people who moved to Aceh due to the transmigration policy was caused by the perception that Javanese people were a threat towards Acehnese society. Aceh rebel groups constructed the identity of Indonesian people, especially Javanese people, as having different goals with the Acehnese society in terms of nation-building. (Huszka, 2014, p.165) Therefore, they believed that the Javanese people who migrated to Aceh, due to the national migration policy, were bringing secular ideas to infiltrate those ideas into the society.

Post-2004: Tsunami, Peace, and Shari'a Law

After the falling of President Soeharto in 1998, the Indonesian government started to approach the conflict with different measures to reach a peace agreement with the GAM fighters. In 2004, Indonesia held its first democratic election after the authoritarian regime fell down and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected at that time. He started to do peace negotiations by having a negotiating team specifically made to discuss peace with GAM, with Vice President Jusuf Kalla as the leader of the negotiating team. After the disengagement of East Timor from Indonesia in 1999, the central government was focusing on diminishing the chance of state break-up during that period of transition, nationally, locally, or provincially. (Smith, 2012) It is believed that Indonesia, as a nation-state, was trying to prioritise meaningful inclusion of its diverse identity groups to create stability and relative peace, but its effect is that other aspects of a country's development could be

hampered if the diversity could not be maintained by the government. (Marquette and Beswick, 2011, p.1709)

Before President Yudhoyono took position as the president, former presidents had done some negotiations to ensure peace. The GAM movement became stronger post-1998 after the secession of East Timor from Indonesia. They had hoped that Aceh would have the same possibility to have their independence from Indonesia. Therefore, the peace talks with GAM within the period of 1998 until 2004 mostly ended in stalemates and more insurgencies continued from both sides. President Yudhoyono's government entered the peace negotiations with better and clearer action plans and offers which included amnesty for GAM and concrete economic programs. (Awaluddin, 2008) The government also managed to convince the military to have a ceasefire during the negotiations which helped significantly in the peace process.

Other than the internal factor of government's course of action with the peace negotiations, there was an external actor that significantly affected the peace process in Aceh. In 2004 a tsunami hit Aceh and damaged the province as well as the people significantly. Many people were dead, and not few lost their houses due to the tragic disaster. The tragedy instigated the international actors to put more pressure on the Indonesian government to resolve the conflict. In a way, the tsunami affected the conflict resolution significantly by creating a conducive environment for talks and negotiations to happen. After the tsunami, GAM lost their resources to continue fighting for independence. The conflict turned into collaborations to rebuild Aceh through humanitarian assistance and aid from international actors, such as NGOs, The World Bank, The United Nations, and directly from foreign countries under the provision of the central government of Indonesia. The freedom fighters also changed their mind from demanding "independence" to "self-government". (Panggabean, 2014, pp.34–35) With the help of Martti Ahtisaari, former president of Finland, as the mediator and facilitator for the conflict resolution process, the government of Indonesia and GAM reached an agreement and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which explains more about the status of Aceh in the territory of Indonesia, as well as their right to "self-govern" in different fields. In this case, "self-government" refers to:

> "Aceh will exercise authority over all sectors of public affairs, which will be administered
> in conjunction with its civil and judicial administration, except in the fields of foreign
> affairs, external defence, national security, monetary and fiscal matters, justice and

freedom of religion, the policies of which belong to the Government of the Republic of Indonesia in conformity with the Constitution; and a stipulation that all decisions on domestic or international affairs related to Aceh undertaken by the national government or legislature would be made in consultation with, and with the consent of, the legislature of Aceh and the head of the Aceh administration."[1] (The Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement, 2005)

After the peace agreement was reached, Indonesia focused the collaboration on rebuilding the infrastructure in Aceh and rehabilitating the Acehnese society after the tsunami. Alongside the rebuilding of infrastructure, the Law on Governing Aceh (LoGA) was introduced in 2006 to ensure the freedom of Acehnese society to implement their self-government status and to enforce the Islamic legal system within its territory. In this case, Shari'a was seen as a way to facilitate Aceh's re-integration, after the conflict, into Indonesian national culture, including its own particular experiences of Islamic revival, as well as to protect Aceh. (Feener, 2012, pp.285–286) The goal of implementing Shari'a law was to bring a social change in both the regulation of society and the character of individual Muslims to conform to a particular set of modern ideals, which is in accordance with Islamic values. (Feener, 2012, p.286)

Humanitarian assistance and aid were distributed to the Aceh province with the main purpose of restoring livelihoods and economic development which was believed to be able to contribute to the promotion of broader social improvements in terms of human rights, gender justice, and democratisation. (Feener, 2012, p.282) However, Jakarta-based Islamist activists and conspiracy theorists began to actively promote the idea that the humanitarian assistance had hidden agendas from Christian missionaries and Zionist agents to turn Acehnese people away from Islam. (Feener, 2012, p.285)Due to the fear of having Islamic values degraded by these hidden agendas, they not only used the foreign aid and assistance to rebuild Aceh, but also started to build a society which could be protected from the idea of globalisation. (Feener, 2012, pp.285–286)

Sharia law in Aceh

Sharia is believed to be the way of life for Muslims with a divine foundation and purpose which regulates the relationship between one person and God by providing a social, moral,

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[1] The MoU was signed in Helsinki, Finland, on 15 August 2005.

religious and legal guidance. (Uddin, 2010, p.627) Sharia, literally meaning "way to a watering place", comprises of the Quran, the *sunnah*, or tradition, of the Prophet Muhammad, the consensus of *ulama*, and *qiyas*, or analogical deductions. (Uddin, 2010, pp.627–628) The implementation of Sharia laws depends on *fiqh,* or Islamic jurisprudence, which is a method for understanding the text of the *Quran* as well as interpreting law. (Uddin, 2010, p.628) Sharia is considered to have "immutable and transcendent" characteristics due to its breadth and divine nature, while compared to specific legal rulings which are considered as "mutable and temporal" because they are issued by humans. (Uddin, 2010, p.628)

In order to make sure the enforcement of Shari'a law is being done by the society, a special security unit was established in Aceh, it is called Wilayatul Hisbah (WH). It was established by governor's decree in 2004 for them to be responsible for monitoring conduct and compliance to Islamic bylaws by providing 'moral guidance' since they are not supposed to have enforcement powers. (Panggabean, 2014, p.42) They have to work alongside the local police unit, since they do not have the authority to act like police officers. The local police unit works under the supervision of each local government, but regulated nationally, to enforce local regulation created by the local parliament. Both security units in Aceh were established with different purposes and focuses, but with the same idea to maintain order and deal with crimes in Aceh.

By enforcing Sharia laws, Aceh also introduced corporal punishments as a method of punishing violators of Sharia. Offences are punishable by caning, fines or terms of imprisonment. The offences which are punishable by caning include *maisir* (gambling) which is punishable by up to twelve strokes, *khalwat* (illicit relations between men and women) which is punishable by up to nine strokes, and *khamar* (sale and consumption of alcohol) which is punishable by forty strokes. (Aspinall, 2007, p.7) Homosexuality is also banned in Aceh as it is believed to be a sin in Islam. By the year 2015, the offences are also applied to non-Muslims in Aceh. There are also provisions in Aceh allowing punishment for Muslims who do not attend Friday prayers or observe fast. (Aspinall, 2007, p.7)

As mentioned before, since 2015 the law applies to Muslims and non-Muslims in Aceh. Even before the Sharia law was enforced, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) or Indonesian Ulama Council of Aceh chapter issued *fatwas,* or non-binding decrees, to regulate social behaviour of people in Aceh which applies to every individuals despite their religious background. In 1980, MUI issued a *fatwa* to forbid intermarriage between Muslims and non-Muslims; a year

later another *fatwa* was issued to forbid Muslims from participating in any Christian ceremony; in 1990, MUI Aceh chapter issued a *fatwa* ordering women to wear *jilbab,* or headscarf, regardless of their religion with the objective to prevent men from committing sex crimes and acts of violence. (Uddin, 2010, p.629) Despite the non-binding characteristic of *fatwa,* the enforcement of *fatwa* seems binding and gives no option for people not to follow it. Even before the Sharia law was enforced, GAM had been conducting *jilbab* raids on Acehnese women, whether they were Muslims or non-Muslims, which often led to them cutting the women's hair when it was uncovered. (Uddin, 2010, p.629) Aceh punished its first non-Muslim violator in 2016. A 60-year old Christian woman was caned in public for thirty times for selling alcohol in Aceh. (Iyengar, 2016)

The implementation of Shari'a law in Aceh has received critiques from various human rights organisation. Human Rights Watch made a specific critique towards two provisions in Sharia law, one prohibiting men and women who are not married to meet in certain circumstances and one imposing public dress requirements, as denying individuals' rights to make personal decisions central to the conduct of their lives and the expression of their faith, identity and morals. (Broecker, C. et al., 2010)

There are at least three problems related to human rights in the implementation of Sharia law: it restricts freedom of expression, it violates people's freedom from torture and public humiliation, and it marginalises women. Indonesia has ratified three international conventions on those matters which are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 2006, the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention Against Torture) in 1998, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984.

The ICCPR affirms the equality of all people, as well as the right to privacy, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. (United Nations, 1976)These rights allow individuals to have a freedom of an intimate life peacefully, to express themselves, including gender identity, through clothes and behaviours, and to be able to assemble with other individuals in public without fear of harassment or assault. The ICCPR also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The Convention Against Torture outlaws corporal punishment, such as caning. The Human Rights Committee refers the prohibition against torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment relates not only to acts that cause physical pain but also to acts that cause mental suffering to the victim. (United Nations, 1987) The

provisions in Sharia laws controlling women's dress requirements and how they should behave in public clearly marginalise women on their freedom to express themselves in their preferred manners.

Another critique towards Sharia law is that the implementation of it has been viewed as unfair. Yayasan Keumala, an NGO in Lhokseumawe, conducted a poll of almost 2000 people and saw a pattern that the implementation of Sharia law as being less than maximal and only touching the poor people. (Aspinall, 2007, p.9) The *jilbab* raids done by WH are often targeting women riding motorcycles while those using cars are untouched. A cynicism on the implementation of Sharia law is also shown on the punishment on gambling. The focus on small-time gambling seems unfair for people who are more affected by corruptions done by government officials. (Aspinall, 2007, p.10) The unfairness in the implementation of Sharia law shows how the law touches mostly poor people while rich people and government officials have protection against it.

Identity in Aceh

Edward Aspinall argues that the notion of identity, or Islam to be precise, in Aceh is a mere instrument for actors to achieve their, mostly political, goals. (Aspinall, 2005) By actors, it means not only GAM but also the Indonesian government and local politicians in Aceh. GAM used identity to differentiate Aceh and Indonesia. At first, they had different understandings on the conception of 'nationhood'. The Acehnese community is seen as an ethno-nationalist community which put the sense of shared blood and kinship among members of the community into the ideal view of nationhood, likewise the primordial view of nationhood. (Huszka, 2014, pp.7–8) On the other hand, Indonesia, especially President Soekarno, had the conception of Indonesian nation as diverse and secular. While Aceh at the beginning had the conception of a nation as based on Islamic values.

The differences in the points of views of how to define 'nation' led Aceh to question their relationship with Indonesia and its future. Indonesia is a country with the largest Muslim population in the world. In 2015, Indonesia has more than 250 million of people and more than 80% of the population are Muslims. (CIA Fact Sheet, 2010) Aceh was the place where Islam started to spread in Indonesia. However, the Acehnese society has always seen themselves as a different entity than Indonesian society. GAM has been using Aceh's

historical backgrounds and traditions to differentiate themselves from Indonesia and to justify the creation of statehood with the ideology that even before the formation of Indonesia, Aceh had a tradition of always persistently resisting foreign powers. (Aspinall, 2007, p.11)

The notion of Acehnese identity and Islam were used before by GAM at the beginning of their insurgency. However, that notion has faded throughout the years of insurgency and the movement became more political. The demand for independence was clouded, after years of insurgency, by the human rights violations and inequalities the Acehnese society experienced, especially during the authoritarian regime of Soeharto. After 1998, GAM focused more on demanding social justice for the human rights violations they experienced and asking for independence on those grounds. At the same period, the secession of East Timor from Indonesia gave hope for Aceh to be able to do the same. However, as the Indonesian government learned the mistake with East Timor, the approach they took was to ensure Aceh stayed within Indonesia's sovereignty.

The Indonesian government also used the notion of identity to assure that Aceh stayed within Indonesia's sovereignty. After the falling of President Soeharto, GAM started to pressure the government to give them independence as they saw the opportunity after the secession of East Timor. Negotiations between 1998-2004 mostly ended up in stalemates as both GAM and the government were unwilling to take the offer from the other side of the party. During this period, the government started to see that the implementation of Shari'a law in Aceh was the best way to achieve peace and offered GAM that option. On the other hand, the goal of GAM, as mentioned before, had changed and the implementation of Shari'a law was not what they asked for. The post-tsunami situation became a great opportunity for peace which allowed the implementation of Sharia law proposal offered by the Indonesian government to be accepted by GAM since the situation was not conducive for both parties to continue the conflict. In this case, the Indonesian government used the notion of identity to offer GAM what the government thought they wanted: the implementation of Sharia law.

Local politicians came into this discussion when the popular idea at that period was to implement Shari'a law as a measure to stop the conflict. They used the implementation of Shari'a law to gain support, even though GAM's demand was independence. Having close to no power in the armed conflict, local politicians used the implementation of Sharia law as their prominent program since it was more feasible for them to offer the people. With the central government trying to stop the insurgency, the local politicians were making ways to

demonstrate pride in being Acehnese without creating a bad image of the central government. Therefore, the implementation of Sharia law was seen as a perfect instrument to achieve their goals, since it portrayed a long tradition connecting Acehnese identity with Islam, yet it did not necessitate conflict with Jakarta. (Aspinall, 2007, pp.20–22)

Aspinall argues that even though the notion of Islam has faded slowly in GAM's movement, it did not disappear from their nationalist discourse due to "its importance as an underpinning for individual commitment to the struggle and as a defining feature of Aceh's culture and identity in GAM's vision". (Aspinall, 2007, p.12)Nonetheless, the role of Islam faded due to the change of urgency from upholding Islam into countering the political game from Jakarta. The implementation of Sharia law is seen as a top-down program, despite the fact that there are many supporters of Sharia law in Aceh, since it was proposed by the central government. (Latschan, 2014; Uddin, 2010, pp.603–648; Aspinall, 2005; Aspinall, 2007) GAM, itself, did not ask for the ability for Aceh to implement Sharia law, but independence from Indonesia. However, due to the situation post-tsunami disaster, having peace with the Indonesian government and accepting their offer to self-govern with Sharia law seemed to be the only option at that time.

The implementation of Sharia law has brought the discussion of identity into another layer. The implementation of Sharia law is believed to be a social engineering process to change not just the institution, but also the society's norms, morals and ways of life. (Feener, 2012, pp.299–300) One can argue that the institutionalisation of Islam into the legal system has also institutionalised the primordial view of identity by highlighting the disparities between "Us" and "Others".

The Sharia law is putting Islam as its core, and everyone has to follow the rules and values despite their beliefs as long as they are in Aceh. There is one similar characteristic between Acehnese identity during the conflict before and during the implementation of Sharia law currently: the exclusive characteristic of Acehnese identity. Beata Huszka classifies the Acehnese society as an ethnically exclusive community where the membership of the community is exclusively reserved for people who are of Aceh origin, not just religiously but also culturally. (Huszka, 2014) However, the disparities between "Us" and "Others" does not only apply in religious terms, Muslims and non-Muslims, but also in economic terms, the poor and the rich and in ethnic terms, Acehnese and non-Acehnese.

As a society with the characteristic of being exclusive, it brings up another problem in relations to freedom of expression and human rights for people who do not necessarily represent the Acehnese 'identity' of Islam. Nonetheless, Aceh allows people with different beliefs to exercise their religious practices. However, there have been cases of churches being torched down by extremist Muslims who claimed that the churches were illegal due to lack of permits. (Kapoor, 2015; Maxwell, 2015; Lamb, 2015) The authorities later tore down the so-called 'illegal' churches to avoid more violence from the extremists. Despite having the ability to believe in religions other than Islam, it seems that Aceh is still lacking on protection measures to ensure the freedom of expression and religious practices, other than Islam, can be done without people having to fear of getting attacked by the extremists.

Conclusion

As a very diverse country, Indonesia's history has been filled with ethnic tensions, frictions and conflicts. In the beginning, I argue that the perception of identity, the role of the "Us" versus "Others" mentality, is central in the discourse of Aceh during the conflict with the Indonesian government and during the implementation of Sharia law after the peace was reached. During the conflict, the notion of identity played a crucial role as an initial cause of grievances towards the Indonesian government. The conflict started with the different perception of what a 'nation' should be and the disappointment from the Acehnese people towards the Indonesian government's view on nation-building. The conflict then escalated into, some may say, a civil war between GAM and the Indonesian government. During the insurgency, GAM brought up the discourse of Acehnese identity as 'distinct' from the rest of Indonesia. A special status was given to Aceh to give them the autonomy to create the society they hoped for. However, the revoking of Aceh's special status by President Soeharto and his developmentalist program ended up increasing the Acehnese society's grievances towards the Indonesian government.

The demand for self-autonomy changed into independence as it was a better way out for Aceh from the Indonesian government's political game which was a detriment to Aceh. The implementation of Sharia law in Aceh can be seen as a solution to resolve the tension between conflicted parties. The autonomy given to Aceh to enforce an Islamic legal system did bring peace between GAM and the Indonesian government. However, the goal of GAM was not to implement Sharia law but to be able to stand as its own nation. The situation after the

tsunami, turned the tables by creating a non-conducive environment to continue the conflict, thus peace was reached in Aceh. The offer to implement Sharia law, nonetheless, can allow Aceh to govern the province with its own customs and values of which related to Islam. The implementation of Sharia law in Aceh has become another problem as people deem it as violating human rights. It is unfathomable that Sharia law allows corporal punishment for violators of Sharia while at the same time it controls people's behaviours. Freedom of expression is being threatened by the implementation of Sharia law and it has been criticised by local and international NGOs.

This research shows that the mentality of "Us" and "Others" did exist within the Acehnese society during the conflict as a driver of the GAM movement at the beginning. Despite the fact that the identity grievances slowly faded and political and economic grievances grew stronger throughout the years of conflict, the sense of identity did not disappear from the discourse of Aceh. After the peace agreement was signed, the sense of identity has taken a different shape. Since Sharia law is allowed to be implemented, the Acehnese society has changed its shape into a more Islamic community. The mentality of "Us" and "Others" still does exist in Aceh in the form of Sharia law implementation which is applied to everyone in Aceh despite of their religious beliefs.

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Corruption in Vietnam: causes and culprits

Yen Duong

Abstract: Corruption remains a controversial topic in the Vietnamese political scene. In Transparency International's 2006 country report, Vietnam's corruption is perceived as rampant, with nepotism and red tape afflicting pretty much every aspect of the public sector, from healthcare, land management, construction, education, and so on. Corruption is also the principal factor that stagnates the private sector, as businesses and foreign investors are frequently succumbed to the burdens of cumbersome paperwork procedures, legal loopholes and bribery. This paper examines the causes and culprits behind the corruption in the country, which takes into account its policy context and its impact on the country's administrative structures. Facing the dire consequences that corruption has brought about, the country's leaders and the Communist Party of Vietnam have proposed a number of measures to curb the widespread corruption, by applying a range of institutional legislations and multiple anti-corruption agencies strategy. These measures, however, have proved to be rather ineffective due to a lack of law enforcement and direct participation at grassroots level. Certain recommendations were thus suggested, which call for more transparency in the public administrative mechanism, the state protection of whistle-blowers, as well as the media and citizen engagement in the fight against corruption.

Keywords: Vietnam, corruption, Southeast Asia, Communist Party of Vietnam, public administration, multiple anti-corruption agencies

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Introduction

Transparency International (TI)'s recent publication of the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2015[1] reveals that Vietnam ranks 119 out of 175 countries, with a CPI score of 31. In 2012, during his speech at the National Assembly, the Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng admitted faults in the political administration system, after a series of high-profile corruption scandals concerning some of the largest State-owned Enterprises (SOEs) in Vietnam, namely the Vietnam Ship Building Industry group (Vinashin) and the Vietnam National Shipping Lines (Vinalines) (BBC, 2012). The case has caused a deficiency of state budget of at least VND 900 billion and VND 1,685 billion or US$ 81 million, respectively (Amchamm Vietnam 2012). The exposal of Vinashin and Vinalines scandals has left a mark on the country's social, political and economic profile, and served as the warning for the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) to reflect on its mismanagement of public administration during the past decade.

There are some questions that need to be detangled when it comes to the subject of corruption in Vietnam. What are the main actors that have contributed to the prevalence of corruption? What are the institutions responsible for the enactment and execution of the anti-corruption measures? And what are the drawbacks of these anti-corruption measures and agencies? Thus there are many evidences to illustrate how corruption is indeed a common phenomenon in the public sector, despite the fact the country's leaders have compromised with the public by a range of anti-corruption regulations and policies that the CPV has increasingly introduced during the past few years. First, there has been a lack of systematic corruption studies on the national level, as the majority of researches conducted are mainly either by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or international institutions such as TI or the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). As a result, there has yet to be a thorough understanding on the structure as well as the causes behind corruption in Vietnam. Second, the country's multiple anti-corruption agencies along with a number of anti-corruption policies, codes of conducts, and regulations have proven to be rather ineffective (Quah, 2006). Third, anti-corruption measures do not integrate with political will, especially when incentive structures for civil servants have been rather "inadequate" (ibid. 8). Fourth, the enforcement of law and regulations on managing corruption has been inept and undermined. Moreover, it is important that we should take into account other unconventional aspects, as under the microscope, the

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[1] Source: Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2015

country's relics of the wars and the French colonisation have a major impact on the administrative organisation of Vietnam, as well as its definitions of morality and cultural values. Within the scope of this paper, however, we will narrow down to the comprehension of the concept of corruption as well as the case in point, then we will attempt to analyse the main culprits behind the rife of corruption in Vietnam, and take a brief look into certain solutions that can be offered to control the problem.

Corruption, by definition as "the abuse of trusted power for private gain", can encompass a variety of characteristics, and can thus be classified into grand, petty, and political corruption[2]. Studying corruption, however, varies from country to country, culture to culture, thus they must consider a number of qualities that can be used to dissect the nature of corruption. Quah (2013, p.221) proposed five factors, which are geography, formative historical experiences, economic development, demography and political system. Understanding the policy context of a country will facilitate the process of analysis, and helps to spell out some latent causes that can influence either its failure or success in the implementation of anti-corruption measures. There have been a number of studies that discuss the importance of ecology - the socio-political, economic, historical and cultural atmosphere of the country in defining its state of corruption and mismanagement (Quah, 2013). In this case for example, it is important that we study not only the role of law enforcement, the integrity of the civil servants as well as the rules and regulations that govern the country, but we must also edge through the its historical account and how it has shaped the country's administrative structure and contributed to a number of causes that lead to different forms of corruption such as nepotism, embezzlement, fraud, oversight, maladministration and so on.

The policy context

One of the prominent features of Vietnam is that it borders the East Sea and has a strategic location that facilitates advancement and mutual transactions with neighbouring countries. Despite all these natural advantages, however, the country suffers from a poor economic development, with a relatively young and growing population of more than 90 million (Quah, 2013). The restriction of state budget accompanied with the excess of human resources can insert a major influence in the proficiency of anti-corruption measures. Historically speaking,

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[2] Transparency International, 2009

Vietnam was under the French rule for over six decades, and the aftermath of colonialism witnesses a visible impact on many facets of daily life as well as the public administrative structure of the country. Questions in terms of the colonial legacy are open to debate, when there is a significant loophole in postcolonial studies on the bureaucracy in the public administration in Vietnam. During colonialism, natural resources were heavily exploited, and power was centralised into the hands of the authorities, as the French ruled on all levels of administration, taking hold of every aspect of the economy and every step of the administrative procedures. Regardless of the fact that colonialism ended a long time ago, the payoff of it has penetrated into many levels of the current Vietnamese public sectors. Furthermore, Vietnam experienced the devastating consequences of the wars, from the French war, the American war, to some short but damaging border wars in 1979. Vietnam finally gained independence after 1975, but it endured a poverty-stricken economy and a young government with little experience in administration. Nevertheless, after the "Đổi Mới" (renovation) reform in 1986, the country has rapidly transformed into a market-oriented economy (Gainsborough, 2006) with more available opportunities for economic and social development. Globalisation and integration into the world have opened pathway to more direct foreign investment, but it has also presented a number of problems that the young government needed to tackle, one of which is corruption.

The causes of corruption

Curbing corruption, however, is not quite a simple task. Vietnam is a one-party country, and the power lies in the hands of the CPV, which is responsible for all decision-makings and the allotment of economic resources, especially in terms of property and land transactions (Le, 2010). Thus there are many factors that can work out as the inducement to corrupt behaviours in Vietnam, and one is this vertical political structure itself that particularly helps to expedite grand or institutionalised corruption in the country. For example, multiple anti-corruption agencies have been established as part of the Law on Anti-Corruption that came into effect in 2006. However, these agencies are all under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister (Quah, 2006), and the control as well as the supervision of the CPV. The centralisation of power means that the government has the exclusive coercive power over the enactment of law, which equalises the fact that corruption can easily be internalised, making it more difficult to combat. This enables the politically powerful to enjoy certain privileges of immunity and

protection through the loophole in the law, which can increase the persistence of corrupt behaviours on the official level.

The multiple anti-corruption agencies strategy also presents many problems. There are five institutions that are responsible for anti-corruption, which are the Government Inspectorate, State Audit, People's Procurary, Central Inspection Commission of the CPV, Anti-Corruption Department - Prime Minister's Office, and the National Anti-Corruption Steering Committee (NACSC) (Quah, 2006). Efforts to appoint duty for each of this department have been rather unproductive, as their duties and responsibilities often overlap. This resulted in the establishment of the NACSC in 2006, whose task mainly aims to coordinate and organise the other five existing agencies (ibid.). Thus there is a sort of competition in the institutional level among these agencies, when their roles are not quite steer clear. There is also a lack of coordination among them, which only dilutes the major task of curbing corruption, mitigating the legal powers and the enforcement of law, leading to maladministration and a waste of resources, likewise many cases of countries with multiple anti-corruption agencies. In compared with countries with one single anti-corruption agency such as Singapore and Hong Kong (Quah, 2013), the reliance on multiple agencies indicates a lack of autonomy for each of this institution and discounts any determination to operate anti-corruption measures effectively.

Another problem emerges is the lack of citizen involvement in detecting and reporting corrupt behaviours. Organised protection and confidentiality for whistle-blowers are absent, as ironically, there have been many cases in which the whistle-blowers have been under prosecution for exposing the politically powerful. Take, for instance, the case of PMU 18 (Project Management Unit 18) in 2006 that shook the country and made the headlines in many international reportages, for it concerned the embezzlement of state budget for personal spending and gambling on football by many high-rank officials in the Ministry of Transportation (Reuters, 2008). Two reporters of two prestigious newspapers in Vietnam, the Thanh Niên and the Tuổi Trẻ, have uncovered the corrupt behaviours of these high ranks and broke out the stories to the public, only to be prosecuted for distributing false information on the news later. In particular, they were punished for "abusing their position and power while discharging public duty" (Reuters, 2008). There have been many doubts over the detention of these reporters as there was a lack of information and transparency in the police's claims that the media distributed false information on the case (Reuters, 2008). One thing should be reminded is that the media in Vietnam is still under state control, which means that the CPV

has the rights to select certain pieces of information to be dispersed to the public, hence it is also authorised to penalise any attempt to distribute news that it considers "inaccurate". The case has unravelled a failure in part of the government in protecting the whistle-blowers, and has placed a question mark on the country's handling of the reported cases of corruption. Charges against these two reporters were widely condemned by the international journalist community, and raised scepticism over the government's commitment to curbing corruption and its constant verbal support of the role of the media in detecting corruption. In all likelihood, there is a risk that the lack in legal protection for whistle-blowers as well as the threats to anyone who is brave enough to not make a blind eye to wrongdoings can discourage the citizen involvement in politics and propagated fear and indifference to corruption. In the long run, this complicates the issue of corruption in Vietnam, especially when corruption might integrate as the "inevitable" part into the cultural layer in general, and to the public administration structure in particular (Le, 2010).

Another reason that can be used to justify corruption in Vietnam is the low salaries for civil servants. There is a huge gap in the wages between the public sector and private sector, despite the fact that public sector, including SOEs, enjoys many benefits that the private sector does not have, such as less control and imposition of taxation and loosened administrative procedures. Thus low wages in the public civil service can trigger motives to seek another source of income and consequently result in a conflict of interest. Salaries for civil servants are based on the minimum wage, which is US$ 89, according to the latest statistics (Amcham Vietnam 2014). Public administration reforms have taken into account the raise in the salaries for civil servants, nevertheless, this effort does not suffice and might not be able to hinder impulses to corruption. Low salaries, accompanied with surging consumer prices can act as the primer for corrupt behaviours. Studies in many other developing countries such as India or the Philippines, have indicated that when the salaries of the civil servants cannot afford daily necessities, they are more likely to entice petty corruption like taking bribes from individuals or interest groups (Quah, 2013). The case of Vietnam is singular, since even the high ranks in the political system are also subjected to state control of wages, which are relatively low. The only privilege that the civil servants can enjoy is high pension for retirement and stability of their employment. All of these benefits, however, do not substantiate the refrainment of ethics violation.

While nepotism is often classified as a form of corruption, in the case of Vietnam, it plays an active role in spreading and enhancing the acts of corruption. Nepotism, as a type of

favouritism, takes place so frequently in Vietnam that it goes without saying, that if you have connections, you have everything. Alarmingly, nepotism is not only visible in SOEs but it is also gradually encroaching the private sector. Unlike the case of Singapore (Quah, 2013), there is currently no agency in Vietnam responsible for overseeing the recruitment and promotion of the civil servants. As a developing country with a high unemployment rate amid the economic crisis, the stability of the occupation, despite low salaries, can be a decisive factor. The culture of kinship within the Vietnamese society can only enhance the chances of people being employed out of connections with the insiders of the system. There is a Vietnamese idiom that says, "Một người làm quan cả họ được nhờ", which can be literally translated as "A scholar is a blessing for all his relatives" (Le, 2008, p.29). Thus the danger of nepotism and red tape in Vietnam is not just about making a blind eye to corrupt activities, it also means that the employment of civil servants is based not on meritocracy but on patronage, and appointments and promotions are made from top-down decisions. All of this, in consequence, can have a direct impact on the capability of the public mechanism and lead to a major brain drain that is currently capturing the public sector in Vietnam, when there is most certainly no investment whatsoever on the good and the truly competent.

The example of nepotism as explained from a cultural perspective allows us to have an insight into the role of culture in shaping corruption in Vietnam. There is still a heavy dependence on formalism in the administrative procedures and this has been rather a frustration for the Vietnamese public as well as foreign investors to the country during the past few years. This bureaucracy is reflected frequently on the negligence, the delay of administrative procedures, the burden of the loads of paperwork, lack of transparency and accountability in governmental activities, partiality, oversight, and irresponsibility in part of the civil servants. Additionally, similarly to the cases of China, Thailand, India, the Philippines, and many other Asian countries (Quah, 2013), Vietnam also has a gift-giving tradition, which only makes it one step closer to tolerating the act of bribery.

Conclusion and recommendations

The meetings of the National Assembly take place twice every year, and it has been rather a norm that the topic of corruption is brought up during the courses of every discussion. Despite the government's willingness to curtail corruption, it still governs many aspects of the Vietnamese administrations. Corruption in Vietnam is continually becoming more alarming,

and is threatening the stature of the CPV, eroding the Vietnamese people's trust in the government and the CPV itself. It also has major effects on the political and socio-economic development of Vietnam, the direct consequence of this is that it makes every foreign investor to think twice before pouring investment into Vietnam. Just in the first quarter of 2014, a senior official of the state-owned Vietnam Railways was suspended after the Japanese media exposed how a Tokyo-based company bribed him to procure an ODA (Official Development Assistance) project contract (Thanh Nien News, 2014). Thus corruption in Vietnam can never be completely ruled out if the government does not resolutely show any interest in understanding the roots of the problem. Corruption has, in fact, questioned the legitimacy and the competence of the CPV, putting the government's credibility on the forefront (Nguyen, 2012).

There are some solutions that can be proposed in order to curb the corruption pandemic in Vietnam. First of all, there is an immediate need to revise anti-corruption policies and develop a framework that can encourage the "watchdog role" of the citizens and the media (Gainsborough, 2006), and this also includes laws that can be used to mobilise public involvement in decision making and bill building, as well as the promulgation of public awareness on the issue. The laws must thus be enforced fair and square to any actor involved, regardless of their backgrounds and political positions. This requires an independent institution that has the operational autonomy to carry on its investigation and punishment. In addition, the multiple anti-corruption agencies strategy must also be reconsidered, because they not only prove to function inefficiently, but are also a waste of human capital and resources. The Vietnamese government must open rooms for more transparency by abiding to the Freedom of Information Act, and by publishing audit accounts that can enable the general public to get accessed to governmental disclosure of information. Studies in many developed countries have shown that, citizens' access to the government's financial activities can gradually change the face of the organisation of the public administration. Public reforms must also put an end to any redundant administrative procedures that are still very widespread in many public bureaus and institutions. In addition to this, anti-corruption measures must not overlook the participation of the private sector (Gainsborough, 2006). More importantly, there is a need to conduct more comprehensive research on the causes and effects of corruption in Vietnam, in order to have an in-depth understanding of the malefactors that infect the public system, as well as the inefficiency of anti-corruption measures and agencies in their combat against corruption.

Both the people and the CPV understand well that radical changes are needed in order to completely weed out corruption. The combat against corruption must be systematic, not incrementally, and this requires an active involvement from both the higher and lower levels of the public administration. The danger in the incumbent political structure of the country is that it is placing the politically powerful above the law, and this can have detrimental effects on the control of corrupt behaviours. Vietnam's integration into the global market has brought about not just opportunities but also more challenges to the coordination of the public sector (Le, 2010). However, it is of great importance that, before carrying out any anti-corruption resolutions, the government must take into account all the prerequisites including the country's policy context and its notable characteristics.

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Cultural diplomacy of a "Lion City"

Miljana Jakovljević

Abstract: The Republic of Singapore, or in Malayan language, known as a Lion City, is today considered to be one of four Asian Dragons, side by side with Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. But it was not always like that. To be precise, it gained its independence only fifty years ago, and since then its star is constantly on a rise. In this paper I will give a brief summary of how cultural policy of this city-state today looks like, what is the current focus on the government and in which direction are its actions guided. Hence, while explaining what cultural diplomacy is all about I will also make clear which are the state organs that are in charge of a cultural diplomacy of Singapore and in what why is their structure organised. Finally, my focus will be on the cultural diplomacy of this country seen through the prism of singed bilateral agreements and conventions. Nevertheless, I will also mention other international cultural relations that this country cherishes without signing any form of legal act as a basis. In conclusion I will give overall impression of its international cultural relations, how they can be improved, moreover on what authorities of the Republic of Singapore should pay attention in the future. All in all, this paper should be seen as a friendly critique and I honestly hope that other fellow researchers and cultural workers in this domain would find it useful.

Keywords: Singapore, cultural diplomacy, cultural policy

Introduction

The Republic of Singapore, or in Malayan language, known as a Lion City, is today considered to be one of four Asian Dragons, side by side with Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea; previously vastly important British colony due to its strategic position as a port, is these days maybe best known for its high quality standard of living, technology, great economy, hence friendly and open politics. It is been a long road for this city-state to become

what it is today, from 1965 when it gained its independence out of Federation of Malaysia. When it comes to the Republic of Singapore, there is several paradoxes, starting from the way how it became state on its own (it was voted out of the Federation by the Malaysian Parliament), or considering how small this state is and yet, how powerful is, up to its politics towards immigrants (unlike any other country in the world in this Republic they are more than welcome; actually this is the way how the population remains the same, considering that population growth is constantly negative, besides all the benefits given by Singapore government). Nevertheless, since the creation this city-state cultural policy was always one of the main focuses of the government. It should not be such a surprise if we know importance of it and effects that can cause. However, in this paper my focus will be on the cultural diplomacy of the Republic of Singapore, created and practiced over the years in surroundings like this one. Further on, at the beginning I will give brief summary of current cultural policy in the country, considering it as a basis for practicing cultural diplomacy. After that, I will pay special attention to the structure of organs that are responsible for international cultural relations. Hence, I will analyse existing bilateral agreements and signed conventions. Finally, in the last section I will give some recommendations how current international cultural relations can be improved.

Brief summary of overall cultural policy of the Republic of Singapore

First thing first, when we talk about Singapore it should be emphasised on the very beginning that this city-state "grew from a third-world country to a first-world country in a span of one generation, 40 years". From one side, it is famous for its medical care, education system, tourism, etc. and on the other this country has really a lot of disadvantages when it comes to natural resources and its size, of course. However, when we only mention its name all kind of positive pictures come to our mind. Reaching that image in the world was not an easy task for the newly born country and its government. Yet, today it established its status of a 'Global city for the Arts' and since before it was known as a 'Global desert' I can honestly say that efforts of the government in the last 25 years paid off.

One of the main characteristics of Singapore's cultural policy, which remained unchanged during half of the century of existence of this state and which is tight connected with the idea of surviving among its surroundings, and the fact that it is quite young multi ethnic, multi religious and multiracial nation, is using the arts and culture in order to raise awareness of

belonging to a nation. At the same time, nation is being branded the as young and fun and in a way created. This popularisation of the nation is a strategy that has also immediate effect on economy and politics. It should not be such a surprise if we know how authentic Singapore's culture is-made out of a mixture of Chinese, Malayan, Indian and other nations. Although creating of one nation out of several of them is something that is done for five decades now, throughout the whole year, National Day celebration, highly ritualised and stylised event is the day when all the efforts of the government reach its culmination. Different state bodies are included into organisation of this event which is planned for months in advance and at first it was dominated by the militaristic events, since the '80s it have been commodified as partly entertainment.

Hence, it is more than clear that cultural policy in Singapore is heavily affected by politics. Nevertheless, government expects from the artists and art sector to contribute to the economy of the country in a significant way so all of their efforts are directed toward that aim. On the plus side it leaded to rapid evolution of Singapore's arts and cultural sector. But on the other side, I could not help but wonder does this sort of policy have really such sort of positive effect?! It is known that if the arts and culture are dependable on being self-sustainable and if they have not just to be self-sufficient but also to contribute its country's economy that they cannot really have the role of a mediator and that the artists will never be totally free in their expressions. Artists will always have to obey to the laws of the market which will be affecting their creative process and final product. Maybe the idea for this view on culture derived from the '80s when its only role was to attract tourists and in a way help to the economy of the country. Though time had changed and new approaches toward culture are a necessity.

Moreover, cultural workers in the Republic of Singapore may have one bigger problem-which is existence of many different forms of restrictions. By that I just do not think of expectations of Singapore's government that arts should be focused on economic and marketing objectives or the demand for government agencies to "shift away from the 'arts for arts' mindset... to contribute to the development of the creative industries as well as our nation social development". Or, how in fact artists are expected to take active roles in order to promote art as a part of its 'global city', which is again decision of those who have the power. As I stressed out before, there are restrictions and I can honestly say that it is a sort of censorship; government from the creation of the country had and still has control over how things are presented, for example all public performances require a permit. Luckily, artists in Singapore 'took the bull for its horns' and they are fighting for their 'place under the sun'; now they

even their own representative in the Parliament with a role to participate in the process of decision making when it comes to cultural policy of this state-city. Furthermore, media and social networks should not be forgotten. They were used heavily during the *ArtsEngage* programme which was response on the new government's idea on new forms of censorship which are considered to be necessary considering the fast progress of technology, modernisation and constant evolution of Singapore.

Moreover, government had launched idea of Connected Nation i.e. nation with ability to connect with the others through creative cluster or via the combination of arts, culture, technology and business. Again, in here we can see that culture is considered to be just one of the instruments in reaching the ultimate goal.

Structure of organs responsible for the Singapore's cultural diplomacy

The state organ that is in charge of the conducting international cooperation with other countries all around the globe is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-MFA. It is divided into eleven directorates which deal with political and economic matters, and seven directorates which are in charge of the matters of relating to protocol, consular issues and Singapore Cooperation Programme among others. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore has exactly forty-nine overseas missions. This Ministry works closely with Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts-MICA. MICA is in charge of the government's information and public communication policies. Its mission is to build a nation of connected people and achieve a better quality of life. This is achieved by developing vibrant infocomm, media and design sectors, cultivating learning communities and fostering an engaged public. Together these two state bodies work on a fostering intercultural dialogue, building international cultural relations, promoting Singapore's culture in another countries, presenting Singapore's values and in a way letting the world to know that this state-city has to offer more than just latest achievements of technology. Third organisation that is quite important for the Singapore's cultural life abroad and within the borders is NAC-National Arts Council with the vision to develop Singapore as a distinctive global city for the arts and the mission to nurture the arts and make it integral part of the lives of the people of Singapore.

These three organisations together work on promotion of culture of the Republic of Singapore abroad. We should know that notion of international cultural relations exists in theory as well

as in the real situations in the politics i.e. international relations. It is used in order to describe usage and transfer of ideas in the field of culture between different countries and nations in order to develop mutual understanding, create positive picture in the minds of people that belongs to a different nation who have not got the chance to get in touch with particular culture or to change the picture that already exists. At the same time all of the mentioned is helping in overall international relations of the particular country and its picture abroad. It should be also stressed out that international cultural relations is a pretty wide notion, so it can be looked as whole international flow of the people, goods, information, with all different headings; or it can be looked as politics which is directed toward cultural contacts, two sided interactions, but also to exporting of culture to other countries. When it comes to exporting culture to other countries, it is important to say that this sort of export can be done my governmental organisations and non-governmental organisations. In the case of the Republic of Singapore it is more than clear that most of the intercultural dialogue and fostering international cultural relations is done by the government, ministries and its organisations. Maybe that is the product of the fact that political regime of the Singapore is not a real democracy. Even though it is stated that it is unitary multiparty country with one legislative house-Parliament, it is more than clear that since there is one really strong party-People's Action Party (PAP). It is important to notice that there is also another strong party in the country, represented in Parliament-Worker's party nevertheless PAP is being constantly in charge since 1959. It is controlling the country in a strict way, but that should not be surprise if we know that main concern of Singapore is survival.

Considering the size of this city-state, which is something that is always on minds of its politicians and the way how they have to make all sort of agreements with different countries (like the one with U.S. according to whom Singapore is buying weapons out of U.S. and it can use its military bases to train its army services), no wonder that Singapore's soft power has to be so developed and why it grows various friendly connections with countries all across the globe. Its soft power is its main tool in international relations and Singapore has developed it to perfection. In addition to that, it is well known that persuading through culture is way more powerful than for example military or economic diplomacy, since it can be done long-term, during peace and conflicts, plus it is always a two-way road. Maybe, that is the reason why term 'cultural diplomacy' was previously considered to have negative connotation as a sort of manipulation via cultural materials and cultural workers.

Cultural diplomacy of a Lion City seen through bilateral agreements and conventions

As I have stressed out before, cultural diplomacy can be seen in its wider sense, like the whole flow of everything that will carry information of a certain culture further on, or it can be seen in its more narrow sense, as an action of government focused toward export of art, values, in one word culture to other countries. Conducting bilateral or multilateral agreement and singing conventions represents direct actions of legal authorities directed toward getting other nations to know about the culture of the country which is making those moves.

In the case of the Republic of Singapore, even though the world is constantly admiring the way they have developed their soft power, but if we take a look at the number of those legal acts it is quite surprising what we can find. Just on the first look we can see that Singapore had signed bilateral agreements with only few countries: 1) "Memorandum of understanding on cooperation between the ministers of education of the Republic of Singapore and the Republic of Finland in education, training and research" signed with Finland in the year of 1997; 2) "Agreement to promote cultural, scientific and technical cooperation" from 1982 and "Agreement on enhanced cultural cooperation" from 2009, both signed with France; 3) "Cultural accord" from 1994, signed with Germany; 4) "Agreement on cultural and scientific cooperation between the government of the Socialist Republic of Romania and the government of the Republic of Singapore" signed in 1971.

According to the legal act signed by the Minister of Education of the Republic of Finland, Olli-Pekka Heinonen, and by the Minister of Education and Second Minister of Defence of the Republic of Singapore, Teo Chee Hean, they have agreed on the following questions: strengthening the links in the field of education and promoting cooperation; facilitating immigration procedures for those who are involved in exchange and training programmes; encouraging joint research projects; facilitating the exchange of information on archives, cultural exhibitions, film, the fine arts, language, literature, music, museums, radio, sports, television, theatre and cultural cooperation in general. It should be also stressed out that the forms and contents of the cooperation will be agreed in detail with institutions and organisations concerned. Thus, it is more than clear that through this form of legal regulation, which represents in a way *lex generali* is made only basis for the future and opened the doors for all sorts of cooperation. That means quite a lot considering that upon this agreement are all future ones made.

Hence, out of all European countries Republic of Singapore maybe has the best developed international cultural connection with the Republic of France. First agreement was signed over 30 years ago and represents a basis for the next one signed in 2009. Memorandum of understanding signed in Paris on 20 January 2009 between the Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeo of the Republic of Singapore and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the French Republic Bernard Kouchner. Before the signing of this agreement National Arts Council (NAC) made a proposal of the government of Singapore in which direction should collaboration go. Idea of NAC was to create residency programmes for the selected artists which will provide greater exposure of Singapore's art abroad while enhancing cultural experience and cooperation; mentorship programme for young, emerging choreographers; showcasing mini arts festivals in Paris and not to forget obligatory exchanges of festivals, institutions, community arts, and last, but not least student exchange programmes. Finally, agreement was implemented and the cooperation begun. At the very beginning of the cooperation the following projects had been launched: 1) an exhibition of haute-couture works of celebrated French Fashion designer Christian Lacroix; 2) presentations by French arts groups – Compagnie 111, Theatre Le Palace, Compagnie Beau Geste and Malabar at 2009 Singapore Art Festival; 3) exhibition of Peranakan artefacts from Singapore's Peranakan Museum was displayed at the Museum Quai Branly at Paris in 2011. According just to these couple of projects we can see that some of ideas that NAC proposed were implemented. As we can see, parties of this agreement instantly started to work on promotion of mutual understanding and getting to know each other's culture which is demanding two-way cultural cooperation. Memorandum of understanding was also signed at the same time in Paris. Signing parties were Union of the National Museums of France and Singapore's National Heritage Board. Minister for Culture and Communication of French Republic Christine Albanel and Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeo were present, and legal act was signed by the legal representatives of both institutions. Thanks to this memorandum these two organisations will work together on bringing the travelling exhibitions both in France and Singapore respectively. Hence, their idea is to explore more cross borders opportunities like in putting together exhibition that will involve several French museums and then sending it to a city-state, as well as joint cooperation of Singapore's institutions to host it. Sharing of expertise and intellectual capital is next in line. Teamwork on this reflects on organising study trips in order to explore various aspects in growing the cultural industry; invitation the expert speakers to seminars/conferences to exchange ideas and knowledge; organising curatorial residences in both of the countries as well as internships; co-curation of major exhibitions

which will involve French and Singaporean curators. All of the mentioned is used in order to promote Singapore's cultural assets in this oversea mission, while at the same time promoting it as a vibrant cultural city. Even though, when he was asked, acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong, replied in one of his interviews that he is so proud on Singapore's good ties with other countries, especially those with France.

Further on, like I have already mentioned before, Republic of Singapore has also signed bilateral agreements with Federal Republic of Germany and Socialist Republic of Romania. While the agreement with Romania was signed in the early '70s and most of the intercultural cooperation between these two countries today is done via ASEAN, situation is different when it comes to Germany. Cultural diplomacy between them is highly developed and although they have 50 year long history of diplomatic relations, idea of promoting and exchanging culture emerged in the mid '90s with "Cultural accord". Cultural accord, as a legal act, represents only a basis so it was upgraded in 2007 with Memorandum of understanding signed between Germany's Vitra Design Museum, National Museum of Singapore and DesignSingapore Council. Main aim of this Memorandum is to initiate a partnership to create original and innovative design exhibitions. It is interesting to mention that Goethe Institute in Singapore did such a great job in connecting these two nations that today German is the third most expanded language that young Singaporeans are learning beside French and Japanese.

Yet, even though Republic of Singapore does not have any more bilateral agreement signed with some of the European countries it does not mean that it have not developed cultural relations. For example, Singapore has its pavilion on the Venice Biennale or its cultural cooperation with United Kingdom also exists. Two Memorandums of Understanding were signed-one between NAC and Arts Council England in the period from 2005 until 2008 and the other one that NAC had signed with Scottish Art Council for the period from 2007 until 2009. Of course, not to forget cultural relations with Ireland and Sweden which whom close cultural contacts are enabled for years now. Actually, in 2009 Memorandum of Understanding on interactive media was signed between Singapore's Media Development Authority and Sweden's Business Region Göteborg with the goal to work together on development and commercialisation of new digital media technologies, applications, services and content that will be guided toward Singapore's, Sweden's and global market. So, once again, even in the cases of international cultural cooperation we can see that unfortunately Singapore's economy will be always number one in the eyes of its government. Everything needs to work in

enhancing economy, even when it comes to promoting values of Singapore as a part of promotion culture of this country. So, another question emerges-what are the real values of the Republic of Singapore then?!

Beside above mentioned bilateral agreements, Singapore has also signed three different conventions related to the intercultural cooperation: 1) "Florence agreement"; 2) "Customs convention on the ATA carnet for the temporary admissions of goods"; 3) "Berne convention for the protection of literary and artistic works" from 1886, last amended in 1979.

Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural materials or better known as Florence Agreement is considered to be one of the UNESCO legal instruments created back in the 17th of June in 1950 and it is still opened for signing. With the changes that time has brought, new needs and circumstances state parties has realised that some new arrangements have to be made so they agreed and came up to Protocol to Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural materials, or better known as Nairobi Protocol in the year of 1976, to be precise on the 26th of November. Its status is the same as the one of the Florence Agreement-it is opened for signature. Core of the Florence agreement is focused on giving facilities on importing educational, scientific, or cultural material, for example just like it was stated in this agreement, there will be no customs duties when it comes to the importation of books, publications and documents nor any other kind of educational, scientific or cultural materials. Further on, it is predicted that each of the signing parties have to grant necessary licences for the importation of the books and publications of the UNESCO or received by the UNESCO, as well as those consigned to the public libraries and similar institutions and not to forget official government publications. All of these relates also on the publications for the blind. For the international cultural cooperation and building cultural relations between the countries it is also important that signing parties agreed to continue their common effort in promotion free circulation of educational, cultural and scientific materials, simplify the administrative procedures governing the importation of these materials, facilitate the expeditious and safe customs clearance of already mentioned materials. Nairobi Protocol came after but has not changed anything important, it had just adjusted some of the already existing articles with existing situation. Considering that this agreement was signed by more than 20 state parties, who all have agreed to follow instructions in this legal instrument we can see that Republic of Singapore as one of the contracting countries has full responsibility on this matter. On the one side, this sort of agreement is helping its cultural diplomacy and promotion of its country, as well as the

process of introducing new cultures to the Singaporeans, but on the other it is quite big burden that it has to carry.

In addition to this legal instrument Republic of Singapore has also signed Customs convention on the ATA carnet for the temporary admissions of goods and in that way it became a part of well-known ATA system. Even though this convention entered into force on the 30th of July of 1963 it took two decades to the Republic of Singapore to sign it during which this country was focused on its internal politics and solving great deal of constantly emerging problems. ATA system is allowing the free movement of goods across borders and their temporary admission into customs territory with relief from duties and taxes. Even though it is used widely by the business community it still represents important document for Singapore's cultural diplomacy. After all, at the very beginning of the paper I made it clear how everything in this country, including the culture, which role should be to educate, to reveal and deal with all the problems that one society has and to enrich every single participator of culture. Nevertheless, practical as always Singapore's government has their mind set only on benefits that it will bring to the economy of the country and considering that this legal act has been signed by other 62 states benefits are not negligible.

Finally, Berne Convention for the Protection of the Literary and Artistic Works created on the 9th of September of 1886, amended several times, with its changes made on the 28th of September 1979. This convention in its different articles is regulating the protection of literary and artistic works (which was specified in the Article 2 of the Convention); hence on the criteria for eligibility for the protection and terms that follows; guaranteed rights, like moral ones, but also the ones related to reproduction, translation, broadcasting, etc; finances, executive committee, international bureau, etc. Its focus is of course, on the protection, copyright and other related rights. Nevertheless, Article 1 states that the countries to which this convention applies constitute a Union for the protection of the rights of authors in their literary and artistic works. On the first sight, someone could wonder why is this Convention important for the cultural diplomacy of a state!? The answer is quite simple and it lies in the fact of that it is quite important for artists and creators in general to be well protected when it comes to the export of culture to another countries, especially if they need to represent the country they are coming from in the best possible way, as a sort of ambassadors of one nation's culture to another.

Not to forget to mention, Republic of Singapore is a member of the Association of the Southeast Asian Countries-ASEAN which was established in Thailand on 8th of August 1967. Together with nine other ASEAN member countries (Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, LAO PDR and Myanmar) Singapore is working on accelerating cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for the prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nations. This is done via serious agreements as a basis, who did or did not need ratification, and upon those legal regulations via media, broadcasting, various projects, promotions, education, exchanges, events, establishing associations and organisations, establishing linkages, etc. Moreover, state members consider ASEAN as a community, so large amount of their efforts is guided toward raising awareness of belonging to this community and strengthening connections between all ten countries. Hence, Republic of Singapore along with other nine state members of ASEAN works on promotion of active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the field of culture and to maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes and to explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves. Further on, ASEAN as a community has developed various international relations with countries all across the globe, starting from Australia, and ending with EU as a community. So, as a member of ASEAN, city-state Republic of Singapore also cherishes these connections. After all, soft power is the strong side of this country.

Conclusion

Just as much as it can be hard to define cultural diplomacy (because it is a sort of a grey zone, between public diplomacy, manipulation and exchanges among the cultures, connecting them and creating new bonds), it can be as much as hard to track all the directions into Republic of Singapore has developed its soft power and cultural diplomacy as a main part of it.

Since, Singapore is such a small country and young, multi ethnic nation developing good relations with other countries in the region as well as abroad is its only chance for survival. Luckily, its government have mastered it. Yet, on the other side, its cultural policy, "national policy designed to support the export of representative export of that nation's culture in order to further the objectives of foreign policy" is quite questionable with its main goal to boost economy, raise awareness of membership of a nation and above all censorship. Just like artists

are controlled within borders of their country, control is even more severe outside since Singapore really wants to show its best to the outside world. Further on, government cannot expect for culture to be self-sustainable, it also cannot expect to get other nations to know more about Singapore's values if it does not invest in it. Bigger budget for culture, is a must have, just like new partnerships and break thru on the new markets, while at the same time branding the nation. Luckily, government's moves are directed towards it so we can expect it in the years to come. Moreover, even though organisations in charge of Singapore's cultural diplomacy work closely with ASEAN's organisations this is not enough. In order to develop deeper understanding and friendly relations with other countries signing more bilateral agreements with more countries is a must, just like it would be helpful for the Republic of Singapore to take a bigger role in international cultural organisations. With such varieties of culture and paradoxes a lot can be done. It is a plus that authorities realised it before, in the '80s, when they leaned on it heavily in order to promote this city as a tourist attraction, yet their focus changed.

All in all, even though Singapore is having strong connections with other ASEAN countries and via this regional organisation with other around the globe that ASEAN collaborates with, bigger involvement of Singapore's authorities and NAC above all, when it comes to this topic is really needed. Signing new agreements, as lex generali, or a basis upon which the rest of cooperation will be developed will help it on its way. Even though Republic of Singapore is a member of ASEAN it cannot expect that all of the cultural diplomacy is done via this regional organisation. Some hard work on its own is required, after all who knows what the future will bring.

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Interview

Gergely Salát, PhD

Yen Duong

Introduction: Dr. Salát is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Chinese Studies at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Hungary. He is also an Associate Professor at the Department of Chinese Studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest, Hungary.

During the past few years, international media have paid more attention towards the maritime dispute on the South China Sea. The dispute certainly raises concerns towards the growing tensions between the countries involved, and more importantly, China's emerging role in the region. As an expert on China's policy, can you share your points of view on China's maritime interests in the South China Sea and how does this affect China's diplomatic relations with other countries?

I think this whole issue should be understood in the context of China-US relations. The Obama administration has this "pivot to the East" Policy which also aims at China. What we see in the South China Sea is some kind of a competition for influence between China and the US. Of course, the countries that are involved like Vietnam, the Philippines or Indonesia consider the islands very important, but the real issue is great power politics. Who controls the South China Sea and the Spratly and Paracel Islands? For the Chinese side, it is quite clear that China is trying to get back the influence it used to have for thousands of years. Southeast Asia was part of the Chinese cultural sphere, but in the 19th and 20th century, it lost its influence. Now it is trying to restore the historical order and get back as much influence as it can. On the other side, the US is trying to retain its influence in the region. In the second half of the 20th century, the US became very important to Southeast Asia, it had good connections with the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, or Malaysia, and got deeply involved in the wars

and other events of the region. What we see now in Southeast Asia is the competition for influence between China and the US. I think this South China Sea dispute is just a part of this competition.

We will come back to the Sino-US relations later. How does this dispute actually affect the security, economics and trade within the region?

It is a very difficult question. If you look at the economic data and trade statistics, relations are flourishing inside the Southeast Asian region, and also between the region and China. I think China has never been so close to Southeast Asia in economic terms as it is now. China and Southeast Asia have very good business relations, and this is true even for China and Vietnam. They are not very good friends, but the trade between China and Vietnam has never been as extensive as in these days. Now we see a contradiction between economic ties and the political and military relations. I think if you are in Southeast Asia, or actually anywhere in the world, you cannot resist the temptation to build good economic relationship with China. It is a great import market and a great source of goods and capital. You cannot isolate yourself from China, especially in Southeast Asia. So what I see is that it is natural that the countries in Southeast Asia are getting closer and closer to China, in economics, trade, investment, etc. On the other hand, they try to counterbalance this economic dependence in the political sphere by building better relationships with the US and the EU. The whole region is depending on China economically, but they do not want to depend on China in terms of military or politics.

The dispute involves many countries within the ASEAN (Associations of Southeast Asian Nations). Does the economic influence will somehow affect the politics in the region?

I think that ASEAN is very divided on this question. There are just too many members, and they have different interests in China. For example, Cambodia is very pro-China in the region, and it will never vote for any resolution that condemns China or which is against China's interests. The same is true for Laos or even Singapore. Other countries, like Vietnam or the Philippines, also members of ASEAN, do have conflicts with China. ASEAN is a rather loose organisation, unlike the EU. I do not think that ASEAN as a community will ever do anything that is against China. Member countries might do something one by one, but ASEAN as a community will not.

Does China also have different foreign policies for individual countries in ASEAN?

China tends to use the "divide and rule" strategy in its foreign relations. It is a strategy that has been used for thousands of years, and China applies it in the case of ASEAN as well. It is holding negotiations with ASEAN, but at the same time, it deals with the countries individually. Actually, China does the same thing with the EU; it has an embassy and a large number of diplomats in Brussels, and Beijing seems to have really intensive relationships with the EU, but for China, what is really important is China-France relations, China-Germany relations, China-Britain relations, etc. It is much better for China to deal with the countries one by one.

So we come back to this sea dispute. How far do you think the dispute will escalate, considering many countries such as Vietnam or the Philippines are trying to militarise it by upgrading their defence forces?

Recently, it seems that the dispute escalates quite quickly. You can see this island building efforts on the Chinese side, but you can also see the militarisation in the Philippines and Vietnam. But I think that these countries are so interdependent economically that none of them will risk a real war. The only case in which a war might happen is if the US decides that it will get into an open conflict with China. In that case there is a possibility that the US will lure or force those countries into war that defy Chinese forces in the region, especially in the South China Sea.

And what are Beijing's opinions when the US expressed that it might intervene to safeguard the security of its allies in the region?

China says that this is meddling in its interior affairs. Chinese have always said that the South China Sea dispute is not an international problem, the islands and the seas around them belong to China, and everybody who talks about them talks about China's interior affairs. So by simply mentioning something as a "South China Sea dispute", one already questions the sovereignty of China. Chinese opinion is very clear, they say that "this is ours, we will not talk about it, and we will not talk about where those seas belong; the question of sovereignty is something we will not discuss". And if the US wants to interfere in the affair, China will

not back off, I think it will even risk war. Not because China wants war, but because of the public opinion, which is about 100% on the side of the Chinese government. They say that this is a Chinese sea, these are Chinese islands. And you will never see that the Chinese government goes against these popular sentiments, because if they say that "let us discuss those islands", the public will say that that government is a traitor, it is selling the country and so on. They are quite nationalistic, and Chinese public will push the leaders of China into a conflict if the US provokes it.

Do you think that this dispute has changed the diplomatic relations between the US and China?

I do not think that Beijing wants to have an open conflict with the US. It is not China's interest to be engaged in a war; China's interest is to have a peaceful environment that makes the development of trade and business possible. China is very dependent of trade. Much of the energy and raw materials that China uses come from abroad, and China's whole economy is built on export, so it cannot really afford to risk the functioning of these markets, because then the economy will collapse, and the whole system will break down. So what is in China's interest is peace. On the other hand, there are certain issues in which China cannot step back. These are the questions of sovereignty over Tibet, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and other disputed territories like the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island. Sovereignty over these territories is a red line that nobody can cross. The conflict is not in the interest of China, but in case somebody crosses the red line, then China will undertake any conflict.

At the same time China is having territorial disputes with not just Southeast Asia, but also with Taiwan, South Korea, India, and Japan. What are China's regional objectives and what are the motives behind these territorial claims?

I do not think that there was ever a time in the history of mankind that men did not want to have as much territory and resources as possible. That is how states work, that is how the human nature, especially the nature of the politicians, work. They want to control as much territory, as much resources as possible. It has always been the same with the Chinese as well. What I see is that the modern national identity of China, or of the whole Chinese nation, was born between the middle of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, when China

saw itself as a victim of Western powers, of Japan, and in the 1960s and 1970s, a victim of the Soviet Union. So they all feel that they have been a victim for most of the past 150 years. In that regard, I think China's national identity is not very healthy, it is not normal that much of your identity is built on your past sufferings. For this reason, for this sense of victimhood, Chinese politicians just cannot say that "OK, we let that territory go". It is just impossible because the whole national identity is based on the desire of getting back the past prominence and sovereignty of China, getting back all the territories, restoring all the influence, etc. That is what Chinese politics in the 21st century are about: getting back the greatness that China used to have.

So you think that this concept of national identity actually has direct influence on China's foreign policy?

I think so. If you hear what Chinese politicians say about the question of sovereignty over certain territories, and the country's territorial integrity, you can see that this whole Chinese nationalism in the 20th and even the 21th century is not really healthy. Actually I think one of the objectives of China is to grow, to develop, to become so powerful, so rich that nobody can question its sovereignty over Tibet, Taiwan, or the South China Sea islands, etc. The country has developed for the past 30 years enormously, and it can develop more. Now they do not want to solve this problem very quickly, they say that they have time, and if they cannot do it now, they can do it in 10 years, 20 years, 30 years or whenever. Maybe in 30 years, they can make the US, Vietnam, the Philippines, India, Japan and everyone accept the legitimacy of their claims, while maintaining good relations with them. China will be so great in terms of strength, money, technology, etc. that nobody will dare to go against it.

This whole territorial dispute also influences Chinese reputation on the global scale. Considering China is now an emerging political power, do you think it will have an impact on how other countries perceive China?

That is a very huge dilemma for China. It has invested billions of dollars in its soft power efforts and charm offensive in order to become attractive. On the other hand, it is also building its hard power. But if you are threatening your neighbours, they will not like you. That is one of the huge contradictions of contemporary Chinese politics. I do not think they

have a good answer for solving this contradiction. What they try to do is telling their side of the story everywhere in the world. Again in Vietnam, China is not very popular, but that is Vietnam. I do not think that anybody in Africa, or South America, really care about the South China Sea. They care about Chinese money, Chinese investment, Chinese market, so you can see that China is more popular in other parts of the world. Also in Southeast Asia, China is not really liked in Vietnam, but in Cambodia and some other countries it is held in a great esteem. However, the growing assertiveness of China in the Asia-Pacific region do have a negative effect on how China is perceived in countries that have a power conflict with China. This is especially true for the US and, indirectly, Europe. The reputation of China in the Western world is not very good, and its activities on the South China Sea will not help.

Do you think that the European Union will have anything to do with the conflict on the sea, considering it is the second biggest trading route, so the security in the region is certainly critical to the EU's economic stakes in the region?

What concerns the EU is the security of the routes, not the sovereignty. The EU does not really care who those islands belong to. On the other side, China do want to have control of those shipping lines. The EU is the largest trading and investment partner of China, it is much bigger than the US or Japan, and most of the trade between the EU and China go through those shipping lines. It is quite clear that China wants to keep the goods flowing. China does not want to stop trade, China wants to control it, and Europe knows that, so it does not sincerely care. On the other hand, what can the EU do with the Spratly or Paracel islands, if it cannot even solve the problem of Greece, or the issues concerning illegal immigration? EU is a good economic community, but in terms of world politics or military, it does not have real power.

So the relationship between China and the EU is more in terms of economy?

Yes. The EU is good in soft power, economy, and technology, but it does not have an army, so if the conflict in South China Sea breaks out, what can it do? It does not really have any political influence. It is possible, however, that the US will apply pressure on the EU, and as a result the EU can, in a way, turn against China. If the US becomes an enemy to China, its interest will be to get the EU on its own side. You can see it in the case of Russia. The EU and

Russia had quite a good relationship until recently. It was not really in the interest of the EU to let the Ukrainian crisis break out and escalate. It served the interests of the US. EU countries like Germany and France had really good trade relationships with Russia, they did not want sanctions, they did not want the relationship to be pressured, but it is quite clear that the US is forcing them in some way to maintain the sanctions against Russia, and to keep the conflict with Russia alive. And the US have the means to influence other countries. The same thing might happen in the case of China. Now you see how the Western press is heavily influenced by the American press and American politics; so maybe in a few years the next target will be China, so most people in Europe will consider China an enemy. And elected politicians will follow public opinion. But this will be under the influence or pressure of Washington, it does not come from inside the EU, because we do not really have any great problems or direct conflict of interests with China.

It is also interesting to observe that during the past year, the Sino-Russian relations have really improved. Do you think that these US-EU sanctions against Russia actually have anything to do with this Sino-Russian relationship, and do you think that Russia will be more involved in the Asia-Pacific region?

Of course, the developments of Western-Russian and Chinese-Russian relations are closely connected. If your border to the West is closed, like in the case of Russia, then you have to turn to the East for investment, trade, credit, resources and support. So actually the US and the EU managed to make Russia fall in the arms of China, even though Russia and China have had quite a lot of conflicts. But they just put them aside, and as they are the common enemies of the West, or at least of the US, they just work together. You can see that in the past year they had this natural gas deal, and a series of energy trade and investment deals signed. Actually Russia's economy was practically saved by China last year. This is quite a big mistake from the side of the West: you should not have made two powerful countries become good friends and stick together against you. On the other hand, China gives help to Russia, but the Chinese never give anything for free. It is quite clear that they expect Russia to support them in the Asia-Pacific conflicts and in the disputes with Japan. In this regard, the US managed to get a very powerful ally for China.

So do you think that China and Russia will establish alliance in order to go against the suppression from the US?

China does not go into any form of formal alliances. It is one of the basic Chinese foreign policy principles that China does not take part in any kind of military or political alliance that might influence its sovereignty. China actually does not have any formal alliance with anyone. It has good relations with Pakistan and North Korea, but they are not formal allies, they did not sign any such treaties. The same principle will be applied in the case of Russia: they will not have any formal military alliance, they will only have this kind of loose cooperation like that in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and they will surely support each other in different issues. They can make the kind of deal that, for example, if Russia supports China in the South China Sea dispute, then China will support Russia in return by providing credit and investment amid Western sanctions, buying Russian goods, backing Russian efforts in Syria or whatever. But they will not get into a formal alliance. And I do not think they actually need that, it is enough for them to cooperate very well, without any form of alliance, to counter Western influence and pressure.

Will this cooperation also be about military?

They have quite good relationships between the two armies. China has been the biggest importer of Russian arms for decades, and the two countries have recently held a number of joint military drills. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is not a very new thing, also has a remarkable military aspect. So Russia and China have good military relations, but I do not think they will enter into a formal alliance, they do not need that. They may do that, however, if there is an open conflict between the US and China, and the US and Russia.

When we talk about these disputes, none of the countries involved actually want any conflict that might be negative towards the economy. So do you think there are any possible solutions for this dispute?

The most probable outcome is that China will get so strong in a few decades, that other countries will eventually let the islands go, and forget about their territorial claims. It is not a solution, however, it is just an outcome. The other possibility is some kind of open clash, for

instance, a conflict between the US and China, but maybe the US will not be a part of it directly. It might provide military technology and weapons for its allies to fight China.

Finally, there can also be some kind of a status quo that is maintained for an infinite time. China may not go into a war that can do so much harm to China itself, so it will not take the risk, and other countries will hopefully refrain from provoking Beijing. Something similar has happened in the case of Taiwan. China has been saying that Taiwan belongs to it since 1949, but has never dared to attack it or tried to actually expand its sovereignty over the island. Maybe this will happen to the South China Sea, too. It is possible that it will belong to everybody but also to nobody for maybe a hundred years. However, I think that if China has domestic problems, then Chinese leaders will be much less flexible because they tend to be rather aggressive outside if they have problems within their borders. So if China has an economic breakdown or a political crisis or something similar at home, then Beijing may one day claim that from now on nobody can enter these seas and they are not open to international shipping anymore, the People's Liberation Army will take control, and everybody should get out immediately. That is why if we want to have an idea of what is going on in the South China Sea, then we have to follow the developments in Chinese domestic politics and economy as well.

For one thing, the Philippines have just brought this case to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, they aim to sue China. Vietnam is hesitating, but it is possible that the Vietnamese government will join in it too.

I just do not think that there is any possibility that China will make any compromise on the South China Seas. The Hague has no means to force them to do so. Chinese people and politicians are very good negotiators, they can make a lot of compromises, but there are certain things that they will never give up, and one of those things is the question of sovereignty. They cannot do that because of this national identity issue, because of the whole People's Republic of China is built on the concept that the ancient Chinese Empire has to be revived, China's greatness needs to be restored, and everything believed to once belong to China has to be taken back. The modern Chinese nation is built on and held together by that concept, and no Chinese leader can make any compromise in that.

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