Nationalism & Nation-Building:
A Comparative Study Between Indonesia & Myanmar

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Abstract

Nationalism carries significant cultural, social, and political implications. Yet, its impacts vary greatly, capable of becoming both imperial or anti-imperial, unifying or divisive, productive or counter-productive. This paper compares two variants of nationalism in Southeast Asia—civic nationalism in Indonesia and ethno-religious nationalism in Myanmar—and their differing roles in nation-building processes. I identify several mechanisms to explain the divergence in their paths, examining demography, colonial influences, and decisions by founding elites. Finally, this paper reflects on the applicability and trade-offs of both models to argue that Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) is uniquely positioned to turn the tide of Burmese nationalism.

Racial discrimination, identity conflicts, and separatism continue to plague nations across Southeast Asia. At the heart of national unity lies the crucial process of nation-building, a process that continues even among countries that declared independence decades ago. A vital aspect of this nation-building process concerns the powerful dualistic role of nationalism in determining, on the one hand, the strength of national unity and, on the other, its stability. Despite both having their own domestic issues of division and discrimination, the histories of Myanmar and Indonesia present two different approaches to implementing nationalism toward nation-building. Myanmar's history is rife with ethno-religious nationalism, exclusively favoring the Buddhist Bamar;[1] contrastingly, Indonesia's founding leaders made intentional efforts to embrace a national identity grounded in shared values,[2] mirroring the "civic nationalism" model characteristically found in the West.

This paper first seeks to trace how Indonesia's founding leaders—Sukarno and Mohammed Hatta—guided the formation of Indonesian national identity through an insistence on civic nationalism, exploring how political elites resisted religious pressures

[1] Thant Myint-U, "Myanmar, an Unfinished Nation," *Nikkei Asia*, June 17, 2017.
[2] Scot Marciel, *Imperfect Partners: The United States and Southeast Asia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 201.

throughout the advent of nation-building. Next, I compare Indonesia's nation-building journey to that of Myanmar to contrast the impacts of civic nationalism against those of ethno-religious nationalism. In particular, I compare the roles of different colonial histories—of the Dutch in Indonesia and of the British in Myanmar—in influencing national trajectories toward one type of nationalism over the other. Finally, this paper assesses the feasibility of a modern-day Burmese transition to civic nationalism, ultimately arguing that oppression under Myanmar's incumbent military junta may afford the National Unity Government—if their coup is successful—a newfound opportunity to introduce the Western civic nationalism model to Myanmar.

Civic Nationalism in Indonesia

The Dutch began their colonial ventures in the Indonesian archipelago as early as the 17th century. Eager to secure a consistent supply of lucrative spices, they established the Dutch East India Company, which ruled over Indonesia for four centuries.[3] Upon Dutch arrival, Indonesia's ethnic makeup was already relatively diverse, particularly in busier trading ports like Batavia. While the majority of the Indonesian populace was—and still is—comprised of *pribumi* (indigenous) Indonesians, there also existed a robust population of foreigners from China, India, and the Arab world, most of whom had immigrated centuries earlier as merchants. Beyond these long-established foreigners, the archipelago plays host to hundreds of different tribes, each with unique subcultures, beliefs, and languages.[4] As part of their colonial strategy, however, the Dutch institutionalized a *divide et impera* approach, exacerbating existing ethnic divisions in Indonesian society to systematically undermine united efforts of rebellion.[5] The Dutch colonists enforced a tripartite hierarchy that placed themselves and other Europeans at the top, *pribumi* Indonesians at the bottom, and so-called 'Foreign Orientals'—referring to the aforementioned group of foreign merchants—in the middle.[6]

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[3] Adam Schwarz, *A Nation In Waiting: Indonesia's Search for Stability*, Second ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 3.
[4] Edward Aspinall, "Democratization and Ethnic Politics in Indonesia: Nine Theses," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 11, no. 2 (August 2011): 289–319, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1598240800007190, 292.
[5] Ibid, 312.
[6] Charles A. Coppel, "The Indonesian Chinese: 'Foreign Orientals', Netherlands Subjects, and Indonesian Citizens," *Law and the Chinese in Southeast Asia*, December 31, 2002, 131–49, https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812305121-007.

As leaders in the Indonesian struggle for independence, Sukarno and Hatta sought to counter this colonial era divisiveness. They based a newfound Indonesian national identity on neutrally shared elements rather than traits exclusive to the dominant Javanese population—a homogenously Islamic and *pribumi* ethnic group.[7] In practice, this decision entailed adopting Malay as the official Indonesian language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) rather than Javanese.[8] Doing so meant that the emerging Indonesian identity did not show bias toward a particular ethnic group while also actively including the 'Foreign Orientals' that the Dutch colonists had systematically separated from the *pribumi* majority.

Beyond establishing a neutral national language, Sukarno and Hatta's party—the Indonesian Nationalist Party (or *PNI*)—also settled upon a national flag and anthem that reflected their overarching mission to form a political identity that intentionally encompassed the diverse societies of the Dutch East Indies.[9] Evidently, instead of capitalizing on the ethnic, cultural, or religious homogeneity of the dominant Javanese people, Sukarno and Hatta embraced a civic nationalism model by rooting Indonesian nationalism in shared values and experiences.

As Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch and transitioned into the early stages of nation-building, its political leaders faced the question of how Indonesia should define itself moving forward. A series of constitutional debates saw disagreements between three competing schools of thought—integralists, constitutionalists, and Islamists.[10] The most notable point of contention surrounded a concerted effort by the Islamist representatives to push Indonesia toward becoming an Islamic state given the vast majority of Indonesia's population subscribing to Islam.[11] The two other groups strongly opposed this prospect, arguing that codifying an "overly Islamic constitution would lead to immediate revolts by Indonesia's non-Islamic communities,"[12] particularly religious minorities thriving across Indonesia's smaller outer islands. With the constitutional debates stuck at a crossroads, President Sukarno proposed a clear set of national ideologies—*Pancasila*—which delineated shared values of religious monotheism, humanity, unity, democracy, and social justice.[13]

[7] Marciel, *Imperfect Partners*, 201.
[8] Schwarz, *A Nation In Waiting*, 4.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid, 8.
[11] Ibid, 9.
[12] Ibid, 9-10.
[13] Marciel, *Imperfect Partners*, 201-202.

Importantly, the flexibility of its first principle—"*Ketuhanan yang maha esa*"—appeased the Islamist camp because, while it formally recognized a select few other religions, it effectively outlawed the atheism that often accompanied communist ideology,[14] which many Islamists feared was growing dangerously prominent under Sukarno's leadership. *Pancasila*'s focus on shared values rather than shared identity further reinforces Indonesia's embrace of civic nationalism as opposed to ethno-religious nationalism.

Indonesia's implementation of civic nationalism in nation-building was imperfect. However, it laid the foundations for Indonesian national identity to focus on shared values rather than race or ethnicity. Indonesia now exists as an amalgamation of over 1,300 different tribes and ethnic groups.[15] While discrimination against certain minority groups still exists, it is often fueled by religious radicalism[16] rather than an exclusionary nationalist rhetoric. Sukarno and Hatta fundamentally tied Indonesian identity to neutral values instead of defining the nation as exclusive to a particular ethnic group or religion.

Ethno-Religious Nationalism in Myanmar

Myanmar shares many parallels to Indonesia through its history and demographic makeup; it is similarly home to a diverse plethora of cultures, shares a history of colonial rule, and has a dominant religion and ethnic group.[17] However, unlike Indonesia, Myanmar's political stability has been marred by countless ethnocentric rebellions, systematic minority discrimination, and general disunity throughout its history as an independent nation. While Indonesia embraced a civic nationalism model in their nation-building, Myanmar fell prey to an ethno-religious nationalism model that effectively defined Burmese identity to revolve around the Buddhist, ethnic Bamar identity.

[14] Schwarz, *A Nation in Waiting*, 10.
[15] Sarah Yuniarni, "Unity in Diversity: Indonesia's Six Largest Ethnic Groups," *Jakarta Globe*, July 16, 2016.
[16] Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Rise of Islamist Groups in Malaysia and Indonesia," Council on Foreign Relations, February 27, 2018.
[17] Marciel, *Imperfect Partners*, 270.

British colonists had occupied Burma since the early 19th century to expand their conquest across Southeast Asia and safeguard their trade interests in India.[18] Despite Indonesia and Myanmar sharing a history of European colonization, three crucial differences may have pushed Myanmar along a path toward ethno-religious nationalism: a different *divide et impera* system, mass immigration facilitated by the British colonists, and direct colonial support for the dominant Bamar population.

The British colonial government in Myanmar enforced their own divide-and-rule strategy more systematically than did the Dutch in Indonesia specifically because it reinforced language barriers.[19] When Dutch colonists accentuated ethnic divisions in Indonesian society, means of communication across different ethnic groups had long been established, such as the aforementioned Malay language serving as a neutral trading language. By contrast, the dominant common language between different ethnic groups under British rule in Myanmar was English,[20] which was intrinsically tied to British colonization itself. The Indonesian revolutionary struggle benefited from establishing a neutral language, which united different ethnic groups while excluding the colonial power. The Burmese, however, were forced to choose: sticking to languages exclusively spoken by their respective ethnic groups discouraged cross-cultural unity, whereas using English would have proven counterintuitive for an anti-colonial movement. Practically, this lack of a neutral language strengthened British-imposed ethnic divisions because it reduced the likelihood of communication—let alone cooperation or unity—across different groups.

Another salient colonial legacy that contributed to ethno-religious nationalism comes from British colonial immigration policy. Much like Indonesia, there had already been a population of Indian and Chinese merchants in Myanmar who had immigrated for trade purposes, predominantly establishing communities in Myanmar's coastal regions. However, in stark contrast to Dutch colonial policies in Indonesia, the British encouraged the mass immigration of Indian laborers and Chinese merchants to bolster

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[18] Anthony Webster, "Business and Empire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885," *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 4 (December 2000): 1003–25, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x00001461, 1003.

[19] Roland Bless, "Divide et Impera? Britische Minderheitenpolitik in Burma 1917-1948," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22, no. 2 (September 1991): 414–16.

[20] Wong Soon Fen, "English in Myanmar," *RELC Journal* 36, no. 1 (April 2005): 93–104, https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688205053485.

their colony's developmental pursuits, relying on indentured servants and immigrants willing to work for much lower wages to fulfill labor demands.[21]

Crucially, the British divide-and-rule strategy also exacerbated geographical divisions by focusing their activities on the Bamar-dominated lowlands while only subjecting the "Frontier Areas"—inhabited by ethnic minorities like the Kachin people in the North—to indirect rule.[22] As such, the mass influx that sought to fill colonial labor demands was especially concentrated in areas that already had a high concentration of Bamar people, directly threatening Bamar interests. Because these immigrants supplied British colonial endeavors, the Burmese likely perceived any grievances resulting from said immigration as direct products of British colonization, making it difficult for most Burmese to separate the anti-colonial struggle from a deeper xenophobic sentiment. In doing so, British colonial immigration policies indirectly reinforced an exclusionary dimension embedded in Bamar-centric Burmese nationalism, further inhibiting any prospects of a nation-building process that was accepting of ethnic diversity.

Perhaps the most influential colonial source of ethno-religious nationalism in Myanmar was an indirect consequence of British anti-nationalist policies. Fearing a nationalist uprising, the British colonial government banned political groups such that no mass ideological mobilization could take place. However, this made room for nationalism to sprout through religious organizations,[23] thereby linking national identity to Buddhism—the religion of the majority Bamar. Religious organizations became vehicles for mobilizing political ideologies like anti-colonial nationalism. The British unintentionally empowered the Bamar people by outlawing political groups while allowing religious organizations. In Indonesia, the Dutch did not promote a particular group's characteristics above others; in Myanmar, the British inadvertently allowed the Bamar ethnic group to frame Buddhism as central to a Burmese national identity. In this sense, Indonesia constructed its pre-independence national identity from the ground up, allowing it to draw from diverse perspectives, while colonial Burma effectively enabled the top-down imposition of an ethno-religiously homogeneous identity by the Bamar people, consequently limiting Burmese nationalism to Bamar-centric nationalism.

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[21] Myint-U, *Myanmar, An Unfinished Nation*.
[22] Marciel, *Imperfect Partners*, 272.
[23] Juliane Schober, "Buddhism in Burma: Engagement with Modernity," essay, in *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 86.

Following a brief yet brutal Japanese occupation during WW2, an independence movement led by General Aung San rose to prominence.[24] Interestingly, while Aung San's nationalist movement was predominantly comprised of Buddhist Bamar, he championed ideas of inclusivity and secularism, suggesting that Myanmar may have been on the path to embracing a model of civic nationalism like Indonesia. Aung San's vision for an independent Myanmar revolved around a federalist model that promised autonomy to ethnic minorities. Aung San brokered the 1947 Panglong Agreement wherein the Chin, Kachin, and Shan groups agreed to join a national union in exchange for significant autonomy post-independence.[25]

However, Aung San was assassinated six months before Myanmar gained independence in 1948, leaving his close associate—U Nu—to take over. As the post-colonial government confronted political instability and economic struggles, U Nu reverted to politicizing Buddhist nationalism as a unifying force, leveraging the support of the majority Buddhist population.[26] Coming out of colonization, many ethnic minority groups in Myanmar either believed in Theravada Buddhism—like the Shin and Mon people—or had some form of Buddhist community—like the Kachin and Karen ethnic groups, thereby making Bamar-centric Buddhist nationalism a limited yet temporarily effective medium for national unification. As such, Myanmar's post-colonial government largely kept the Bamar-centric symbols and institutions that had initially formed the foundation for a Burmese national identity under British colonial rule.[27] Instead of staying true to a civic nationalism model like Indonesia by creating an inclusive national identity that focused on shared values, Myanmar ultimately fell back on ethno-religious nationalism to ensure short-term political stability and garner public support to legitimize their newly independent state.

The Future of Nationalism in Myanmar

Myanmar has endured a multitude of revolts, coups, and military takeovers since it gained independence from the British. Most recently, the Burmese military—

[24] Marciel, *Imperfect Partners*, 272.

[25] Ashley South, "Towards 'Emergent Federalism' in Post-Coup Myanmar," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 3 (December 2021): 439–60, https://doi.org/10.1355/cs43-3a, 444.

[26] Frank N. Trager, "The Failure of U Nu and the Return of the Armed Forces in Burma," *The Review of Politics* 25, no. 3 (July 1963): 309–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034670500006082, 311.

[27] Helen James, "Buddhist Socialism," *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to Timor*, ed. Keat Gin Ooi (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 284-285.

otherwise known as the Tatmadaw—staged a coup d'etat after its proxy party lost the 2020 elections, spurring nationwide protests against the military in what has since been dubbed the "Spring Revolution".[28] The military, incapable of consolidating power, has waged war against the Burmese people; the protestors have responded by forming the National Unity Government (NUG)[29]—advised by the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC)—to overturn military autocracy through armed resistance and establish a federal democracy in its place.[30] Although the NUG has yet to displace the military and reclaim Myanmar, it is worth questioning how the NUG should envision a rebuilt Burmese society; as was the case with both colonial Indonesia and colonial Myanmar, the type of nationalism empowering the independence movement will likely persist postbellum. Properly taming nationalism as a political tool can prove crucial in both mobilizing revolutionary forces in their struggle against the military as well as ensuring political stability should the NUG be victorious in their efforts.

To comparatively assess the viability of these nationalism models for the NUG, it is important to unpack another nuance in how their practical application differs. Myanmar's post-colonial government discarded civic nationalism in exchange for Bamar-centric ethno-religious nationalism because it needed to ensure political stability upon achieving independence. Yet, given Indonesia and Myanmar's shared characteristics of extensive diversity, a dominant ethnoreligious group, and European colonization, why was post-colonial Indonesia able to get away with civic nationalism and avoid devolving into ethno-religious nationalism? One explanation may lie in their different journeys to achieving independence.

Despite several smaller instances of armed rebellion under British colonial rule, Myanmar's path to independence never featured a full-scale anti-colonial war. Instead, Myanmar gained its independence through negotiations between the Burmese elite and British colonists. Weakened from WWII and seeing little strategic importance in maintaining control over Myanmar, the British colonists gave in to international pressures calling for decolonization worldwide.[31] This trajectory differs from that of Indonesia as Dutch colonists, though subject to similar international pressures, were

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[28] Saw Kapi, "Understanding Myanmar's Spring Revolution," *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2022.
[29] Hannah Beech, "Fighting to Govern Myanmar, from a Teeny Office in Washington," *New York Times*, November 13, 2023.
[30] Aye Chan and Billy Ford, "As Myanmar Coup Spurs National Resistance, a Unified Nation Could Emerge," United States Institute of Peace, April 20, 2022.
[31] Mallory Brownespecial, "Burma Independence Pact Signed; Nation to End British Ties Jan. 6; Burma Signs Pact for Independence," *New York Times*, October 18, 1947.

adamant about reasserting their control over the archipelago. The strategic importance of Myanmar for the British was largely secondary—a comparably small extension of their more important colonial enterprise in India; meanwhile, Indonesia's vastness and geographical position offered much more strategic benefit for the Dutch. As such, the British were more open to peacefully ceding Myanmar to the independence movement whereas Indonesians put up a bloody armed resistance against Dutch colonial forces from 1945 to 1949.[32] This difference holds potentially drastic implications for nationalist sentiments. The Indonesian independence movement was able to form an inclusive national identity through collective anti-colonial struggles, pushing them to define nationhood through shared civic values. Contrastingly, Myanmar's comparably bloodless path to independence lacked the same anti-colonial war that may have been necessary to transform widespread grievances into a force of civic unity; instead, as the British left Myanmar, the ethno-religious divisions they had sown into its sociopolitical fabric remained unscathed.

While the theoretical trade-offs seem straightforward, the practical merits of ethno-religious nationalism and civic nationalism are more contextual than categorical. Understanding the contextual factors that impact the effectiveness of one type of nationalism over the other may illuminate which of the two models better suits the NUG's objectives and, by extension, how they should approach the nation-building process. The military junta has proven to be a limited group of ultranationalist Bamar who show little regard for either Myanmar's diverse citizenry or its democratic aspirations.[33] This current dynamic echoes Indonesia's experiences with civic nationalism in two ways.

First, much like how disparate ethnic groups in Indonesia banded together under a model of civic nationalism to overthrow an oppressive colonial regime, the NUG comprises many ethnic groups sharing a vision of democratic reform and liberation from military rule. Despite Bamar-centric nationalism remaining embedded throughout Burmese society, the sheer brutality of the autocratic military junta in forcibly seizing power and oppressing Burmans has afforded the anti-military rebellion a source of unity against a common enemy. Additionally, the NUG's anti-military

[32] Eric Tagliacozzo, "The Origins of the Indonesian Nation: The Indonesian Revolution of 1945-49," USINDO, January 9, 2020.

[33] Ye Myo Hein and Lucas Myers, "Myanmar's Resistance Is Gaining Ground, but It Needs U.S. Help," *New York Times*, December 22, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/22/opinion/myanmar-resistance-military.html.

struggle is much unlike Aung San's independence movement in that, because its shared values are informed by its diverse composition rather than imposed upon them by greater authorities, it has the unique opportunity to establish a strong sense of civic nationalism. The NUG movement finds unity not in a shared identity but in their shared oppression by the military—a connection that the privileged Bamar majority likely could not find with marginalized ethnic minorities under British colonial rule. As such, it is clear that the specific circumstances of the NUG's rebellion against the military lend themselves to an effective civic nationalism model that can both empower the armed struggle and maintain political stability in a future Myanmar free from military occupation.

Second, a reexamination of Indonesia's civic nationalism can illuminate how the NUG should approach constructing shared values for a national identity. The same flexibility in Indonesia's *Pancasila* that sufficiently appeased moderate Islamist delegates in the constitutional debates was also considered unsatisfactory by hardline Islamist groups. The early 1950s saw several Islamist rebellions express their strong dissatisfaction with Indonesia's religious pluralism. Most notable among these were the Darul Islam campaign in West Java and secessionist threats in South Molucca.[34] It became increasingly clear that a national identity model based on shared values had difficulty coexisting with radical ideologies. Yet, in the same decade, the *Pancasila* ideology also stirred threats to national unity from the opposite end of the spectrum. Because the first principle only formally recognized select religions, the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (PRRI) in West Sumatra sought to take down the central government for being sympathetic to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) under Sukarno.[35]

As a values-based model of national identity, Sukarno's *Pancasila* was failing by being both too tolerant of religions beyond Islam and too intolerant of communist-informed atheism. This dichotomy adds nuance to our understanding of the merits of civic nationalism: when a country bases its national identity on shared values, whether the resultant nationalism is inclusionary or exclusionary depends on the shared values themselves. Because *Pancasila* largely promoted some degree of religious tolerance, Indonesia's unity was threatened by radical religious exclusionists. At the same time, had the *Pancasila* been more accepting of atheism, similar minority ideologies could

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[34] Schwarz, *A Nation in Waiting*, 11.
[35] Ibid, 13.

have enjoyed better protection under the law rather than become catalysts of internal strife.[36] Learning from this, the NUG should aim to strike a delicate balance between these two interests, promoting ideological tolerance while simultaneously rejecting exclusionary or discriminatory perspectives that may threaten a newfound unity built upon civic nationalism.

In forming a new Burmese identity, the NUG cannot assume civic nationalism to be inherently superior to ethnoreligious nationalism; instead, they need to recognize why certain models work for their given situation and understand how they can best leverage said models for their benefit. As they embrace a civic nationalism model, the NUG must emphasize shared values of democracy and plurality to consolidate a national identity that effectively separates their resistance from the military junta by ideology without marginalizing ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities by identity.

[36] Chiara Formichi, "The Limits of Pancasila as a Framework for Pluralism," *Religious Pluralism in Indonesia*, December 15, 2021, 1–13, https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501760433.003.0001, 2.