



IDENTITY AND BORDER: COMPARATIVE CASE OF “RE-BORDERING AND DE-BORDERING” IN MYANMAR AND INDONESIA

Siti Aliyuna Pratisti¹, Arfin Sudirman², Irman G. Ianti³, Ali Zahid⁴

¹Universitas Padjadjaran, West Java, Indonesia
aliyuna@unpad.ac.id

² Universitas Padjadjaran, West Java, Indonesia
arfin.sudirman@unpad.ac.id

³ Universitas Padjadjaran, West Java, Indonesia
irman.lanti@unpad.ac.id

⁴ Universitas Padjadjaran, West Java, Indonesia
zahid@unpad.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Identity, as a symbolic system to interpret the world, plays a significant role in shaping human understanding, including social and political structures. Reid (2010) listed key identity markers, including religion, language, bounded sovereign space, censuses, and names. Ethnicity and religion retain a critical point as identity makers since they precede the nationalist identity—and may as well outlast them. In line with Reid’s argument, Farzana (2017) notes the danger of the process of “us” and “othering” in Myanmar as an example of how identity is prone to be manipulated to assist the needs and aspirations of the dominant elites, while at the same time, politically excluded the non-dominant ethnics and communities. This article explores how material ideas of borders connect to immaterial structures. Two formations of borders—Myanmar and Indonesia—are compared with focused on scrutinizing similarities and differences in the formation of the immaterial border between the two countries. Despite showing a palpable hypothesis—Indonesia being a successful case of identity construction, while Myanmar is quite the opposite—, revisiting and reconsidering the concept of ‘Re-bordering and De-bordering’ of the two countries are relevant to add new perspectives on the formation of national identity.

Keywords: Immaterial Border, Indonesia, Myanmar, National Identity

INTRODUCTION

The wave of decolonization witnessed the birth of nation-states, including in Southeast Asia. While facing the challenge of political transitions, these newly independent countries also faced another challenge of formatting national identity, as most of the countries in Southeast Asia are diverse in terms of ethnicity, language, also religion (Peletz, 2024). In later development, Indonesia and Myanmar offered interesting comparison in term of national identity construction due to its opposite condition. Indonesia, on one hand, successfully embraces ethnic and religious diversity. Today’s

formation of identity in Indonesia is a result of a long struggle reflected on the early debate on the state foundation during early Indonesian independence, also struggle over state repression during the New Era Order regime (Ahnaf, 2018). The relatively positive progress, however, still faces internal challenges due to horizontal friction between ethnic or religious communities. Myanmar, on the other hand, has been grappling with political and ethnic tension since the country is still young. The instability due to the Junta's coupe has led the country into a prolonged conflict that shattered the whole nation. Myanmar's formation of national identity is hampered by the repression of the Junta elite to the non-Burmese identity (Dittmer, 2010).

The striking contrast of identity formation, amidst political instability and struggle over repression from authoritarian regimes, performs as the main consideration in selecting both countries as cases for comparison. In addition to the concept of national identity, this article also emphasizes the idea of a border—a material and immaterial symbol of a state's identity. With Myanmar's national identity in limbo, their national border "*can no longer able to effectively promotes ties of loyalty and identity instrumentally, by fulfilling the needs of its citizens*" (Peter, 1989). Based on the mentioned conceptual framework, this article aims to explore "*What similarities and differences can be found in the formation of immaterial borders between the two countries?*" Addressing this question we employ Di Matteo's (2024) concept of re-bordering and de-bordering as comparative frame; with re-bordering defined as the practice of reinforcing borders and boundaries, while de-bordering refers practices of transcending traditional division (Di Matteo, 2024, p. 7). In further explaining Indonesia and Myanmar's comparative identity formation; this article is divided into the following sections: conceptual review, methods, results on the comparison of the national identity formation of the two countries, and a discussion that will focus on the analysis of immaterial borders.

LITERATUR REVIEW

National Identity

Nation, according to Anderson (1983), has less ideological in nature as it more closely associated with anthropology; "*it is 'an imagined political community...as both inherently limited and sovereign*" (p. 6). Anderson's theory shaped today's understanding of nationalism and provides a robust explanation of the origin of national identity that goes deeper than mere political formations. It took account of the national creation with primary catalysts including religious language and time consciousness. Supporting Anderson's idea, Hamilton (2006, p. 75) stated that anthropological approaches are often overlooked, as many nationalism theorists often address nation formation based on the Liberal perspective on managing individual rights or the Marxist view of economic politics. Anderson's approaches to nationalism is based on four characteristics: (1) application of cultural theory and explore the intertwined forces behind national identity formation; (2) addressing the problem of 'sacrifice' made in order to make national identity function; (3) to move beyond communities primordial ties, and; (4) engage

discussion among parties, including the colonized and the colonizer (Anderson in Hamilton, 2006, p. 77). By applying these characteristics, formation of national identity put communities as an active subject in maintaining the identity borders.

In similar vein with Anderson, İnaç and Ünal (2013) mentioned that identity formation is a process dependent on time and space. In the formation of national identity, there is always a notion of continuity and dynamics positioning the 'self' in relation to 'other'. İnaç and Ünal (2013, p. 224) also mentioned,

“This transformation is referred to within two factors. First; the authenticities are not natural and given by birth, but constructed within the social and historical framework. Second; the history sense of identity means not only the positioning of identity units within the historical process, but also changing the comprehensive and holistic character of any given common identity unit within the historical perspective. In any certain period of history, a kind of identity might be comparatively more influential over the people.”

The social dynamics, however, is not the only key factor in national identity formation, as Tilly (2002) stated *“nationalism is not primordial condition, but a political tool and cultural narrative linked to social movement both from ruler-defined or social claims”*. While Triandafyllidou (1998, p. 609) added that in the process of formation, the significant 'other' provides an in-group sense of belonging and makes the construction of identity relevant. In the comparative case of Indonesia and Myanmar, the construction of otherness is more visible in Myanmar's recent political unrest, while in Indonesia's case, the construction of otherness is discussed during the country's early independence.

The Immaterial Border

Studies on borders, often refer to the traditional perspective of liberalism as the concept of border is mainly perceived as barrier to that of constructed “borderlands” and reflects the phenomena of economic, social, and cultural within the specific territory (Arieli, 2016). The traditional perspective also relies on the material symbolic of border in drawing its conception, such as: line on the maps or state territoriality. Demetriou & Dimova (2018) stated that the materialization of the border has prompted the interest on the securitization of borders that intensifies its focus on the operationalization of the state within and outside its borders. In this sense, the conception of border is taken for granted; the constructed process that shaped the idea of imagined political communities is overlooked. Myanmar's political unrest dwells on the struggle for material border, without paying much attention to the construction of national identity (Dittmer, *Burma or Myanmar? The Struggle for National Identity*, 2010)—or the country's immaterial border.

The shift of perspective is necessary, as Dimova (Demetriou & Dimova, 2018) shows, *“how the mediation between materialities and immaterialities takes on different modalities in the centre and at the borders of the state, which are nevertheless connected and reinforce each other”*. It is a reflective process, in which in border study, collective memories, documented history, films, markets relations, and cultural philosophy, are as important as military technology. In line with Dimova, Richardson (2016, p. 212) argue

that immaterial border can dramatically shape communities, even without the presence of state, “*communities are empowered, emboldened and adaptive enough to articulate an alternative vision of identity that can take them beyond the nation and into the state*”. Richardson also introduces the concept of ‘hyper-border’ to encapsulate the practice of immaterial border, a concept that refers an ‘*intimate relationship between the existence of spatial gaps and the gaps between law and life*’ (Richardson, 2016, p. 203). Based on the mentioned literatures, this article will focus on exploring the immaterial border to understand the political struggle and condition of the selected comparative cases. We employ Demetriou & Dimova (2018) process of mediation between immaterialities and materialities that take shape around borders. By comparing Indonesia and Myanmar, this article aims to find similarities and differences of the non-material aspects of both countries national identity construction.

METHOD

To explore and compare the making of the national identity of Myanmar and Indonesia, this research applied qualitative analysis with interviews, focus group discussion, and observation as data collecting methods. Researchers performed a preliminary study for two months before visiting Myanmar in July 2024, while data on Indonesia's national identity was gathered from literature studies. Interviews with academics in Myanmar and diplomats from donor countries are conducted with a semi-structured method during official meetings and informal meetings. In addition to interviews, we also held group discussions to get more variety of data. Attained data from interviews, group discussions, and observations, are categorized and analyzed based on conceptual frame and theoretical development from fieldwork. In addition to the conceptual framework, researchers also compared data from both countries—Indonesia and Myanmar—to explore the construction of immaterial borders and compare the data based on the theoretical frame. Pseudonyms are used to enclose respondent identity for safety reasons, especially for respondents from Myanmar.

RESULT

Unity and Diversity: Construction of Indonesia National Identity

Indonesia's sovereignty is based on the material border of the entirety of the Dutch East Indies, spanning from the western tip of Sumatra to West Papua. The term ‘unity and diversity’ is applied to embrace the country’s diverse ethnic and religions. Nordholt (2001) mentioned two fundamental theme in Indonesia identity formation (pp. 883-884):

1. *If Indonesia wants to continue as a nation-state, then it will be of the essence to reach a new consensus on the national identity, on what 'to be Indonesian' means. This brings us to the core of the politico-ideological debate that started as early as 1928 but had not reached its culmination in 1945...This very question of identity, however, also focuses on the relationship between the 'state' and the different ethnic and regional groups;*

2. *From this follows the necessity to develop new structures. This means, from an administrative and economic point of view, that greater consideration must be shown for regional feelings of self-respect and justice. To put it succinctly, the central question is that concerning the degree of regional autonomy.*

Nordholt's argument is in line with Kimura's (2013) statement on the formation of administrative provinces that best reflect cultural or ethnic fault lines within the country. But this is not the case during the New Order regime as Soeharto's government tend to incline to give political privilege to small political elite while large groups of society were being excluded from participating in the political domain. Patrimonial-militaristic regime during the New Order practice within the pattern of patron-client, that gradually move away from the idea of "*unity in diversity*" as mandated in the country's basis principle of identity (Nordholt, 2001; Crouch, 1979).

Another challenge that hampered the unity of Indonesia's national identity is related to the systematic discrimination against Chinese Indonesians. The prohibition to use Chinese name and restriction for political participation was issued by Soekarno administrative and maintained during the Soeharto regime. The condition changed during the Abdurahman Wahid administrative, as Wahid issued a policy to end the systematic discrimination of Chinese-Indonesians. However, research conducted by Hoon (2013) showed that, "*that Chinese-Indonesians still did not feel like full Indonesian citizens and have thus refrained from participating in politics*". The reluctance to fully identify as Indonesian provides an example of obstacle in shaping and re-shaping Indonesia national identities. Religion is another face of problem to the country's identity formation.

Nordholt (2001) stated, "*After almost fifty-six years of independence, Indonesian society seems more divided than ever*". His concern is triggered by the increasing religious sentiment in the post-reformation era. Muslim majority plays a dominant role in politics, while at the same time, fundamental rights for religious freedom are often neglected, cases such as the prohibition of building churches, are common even during the post-Soeharto era; also the trend to unrecognized the local beliefs still persist. The lack of recognition is also face by the indigenous community, as Maybury-Lewis (2002) stated, "*Indigenous people' in Southeast Asia, including the indigenous, traditional peoples of Indonesia, are seen as outsiders whose way of life does not conform to the national narrative; hence, their ways of life are not being accommodated by the state*". Another challenge comes from separatism, especially the Free Papua Movement, which indicates there is still a divided loyalty in the construction of Indonesia's national identity. Democratization of the post-New Order regime has paved the way to eliminate some immaterial borders, including decreasing ethnic dominance and the recognition of the Chinese community. However, despite the positive outcome, there are narratives of religious sentiment that are prone to shatter the de-bordering process of Indonesia's national identity.

Divided Legacy: Formation of Myanmar National Identity

Myanmar, similar to Indonesia, is a land of diversity. The country blessed with strategic location and diverse ethnic population. It shares border with India, China,

Thailand, and Bangladesh—overtime, Irrawaddy River that offers abundance catch and fertile land, has attracted people to reside along its riverbank. Today, Myanmar population composed of 60% Burmese majority, and 135 different ethnic minorities (Chaturvedi, 2012). Being the majority, the Burmese claim important positions in politics, economics, and education. The imbalanced distribution of social and political power has become the root of conflict in Myanmar. In addition to political imbalance, colonialism also plays a significant role in dividing the country. Aiming to control the colonized people, the British administration categorized people “into ethnic groups that would come to be regarded as immutable and biologically determined” (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 4), for the purposes of recruitment into the colonial army—in which the ‘proper’ Burmese are exclude from this recruitment. Further, Report of International Crisis Group (2021) also mentioned: “The British also governed the ethnic-minority-dominated uplands separately from “Burma proper”, as semi-self-governing “frontier areas” under their hereditary chiefs; these areas had never come under the full control of Burmese kingdoms in the past.” The categorization and labeling approaches of British colonial has result in deep divisions and inter-group tensions.

An attempt to re-construct the country’s national identity comes with simplest solution: a lexicographical effort by acquired a new name for the unrest country. Dittmer (2008) stated the naming issue as follows:

The State Law and Order Protection Council (SLORC) decided in 1989 (as decreed in the Adaptation of Expressions Law) that their country, heretofore referred to as Burma, was henceforth to be referred to (in English) as Myanmar, that Rangoon would be called Yangon, and so forth. The name Myanmar is taken from the literary form of the language, while the term Burma is derived from the spoken form (in Bamar, the language of the dominant ethnic group)”

However, the effort has limited impact as the country faces a bigger problem than a lexicographical one. Myanmar (or Burma) gained independence in 1948 as a parliamentary democracy, before the independence; the Panglong Conference that took place in February 1947 has cemented an agreement between the Burmese and the non-Burman ethnic minorities to accept full autonomy in internal administration. This historic agreement formed the basis for the ethnic minorities to join the Burman majority in the quest for independence. But the hope for unity was only short-lived as later that year, General Aung San was assassinated. Dittmer (2008) also mentioned that, “the new nation faced serious communist as well as ethnic insurrections, which neither parliamentary democracy nor Ne Win’s subsequent dictatorship were able to resolve” (p. 886)

In addition to conflict in its early independence, the road to democracy in Myanmar has been hampered as in 1962, Ne Win, the army general, initiated coup, introduces “Burmese way to Socialism” and formed The Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). Since then, the country has been ruled by a series of military dictatorships and the narrative of national identity is put under the pretense of power elite (Dittmer, 2008; Interview, 2024). Ethnicity remains as Myanmar’s great divide; and without revision to the 1982 citizenship law that put ethnicity as legal basis, any attempt to transform and diminishing

the border of ethnicity, will face a evidently facing failure. In similar vein with Dittmerr, Chaturvedi (2012) stated that as the junta fails to implement the Panglong Agreement, dissatisfaction resulted in rooted mistrust in the people of the ethnic areas, forcing them to take up arms to demand for their rights, and peace agreements have never been sustained in Myanmar.

DISCUSSION

Re-bordering and De-bordering of National Identity

Comparison of Indonesia and Myanmar national identity formation will be explored further by applying the concept of re-bordering and de-bordering. The concept also provides a frame in depicting the mediation between immaterial and material border that reflect in the countries' identity construction (Di Matteo, 2024; Demetriou & Dimova, 2018). First, the concept of re-bordering, or intensifying identity line, are present in both cases. In Indonesia, attempts to unite various ethnicities and religions facing challenges from time to time. During the early independence, a narrow view on ethnicity and political struggle had excluded the Chinese community. The exclusion imprinted in Indonesian collective memory and often triggers inter-community tension (Pratisti et al., 2019a).

During Soeharto regime, ethno-political border emerged as result from the effort in maintaining the centralized power of the Javanese elite in government. The ethnic re-bordering lead to dissatisfaction from people in various ethnic background and resulted in the implementation of decentralization policy during the post-Soeharto era. Reformation era witnessed both re-bordering and de-bordering of Indonesia national identity. There are positive changes in political and social policy that brings hope in decreasing identity tension, including the integration of Chinese identity, recognition of local beliefs, and decentralization that give the local governments more authority in making their own decision. While during reformation era, the process of de-bordering also supported by democratization and freedom of press. However, despite the positive progress, reformation era also witnessed re-bordering of religious identity as religion enters the realm of politics (Pratisti et al, 2019b). With political party showing inclination to religious identity in gathering their vote, the re-bordering is inevitable. This trend posed a negative impact on religious freedom and tolerance between religious communities in Indonesia.

Despites many challenges, in compare to Myanmar, re-bordering in Indonesia is relatively thin. Data from literature review, interviews, and direct observation show that re-bordering in Myanmar come in multiple layers and related to the national history and colonial legacy. The complex re-bordering that rooted even prior to Myanmar's independence has result in crosscutting identity border, divided not only ethnicity, but also religion and race. The narrative of national identity as stated in the Panglong agreement failed to provide a solid construction of unity for Myanmar due to internal political struggle. However, there is an interesting development regarding the possibility of de-bordering in Myanmar. De-bordering, or practice of diminishing border (material or

immaterial), is presented in the form of inter-ethnic coalition in opposing the junta. This condition stated by International Crisis Group (2021, p. 2) as follow:

“The parallel National Unity Government (NUG) in September declared a people’s defensive war, calling on civilians across the country to rise up against the regime. While the NUG has no military capability of its own, and its declaration has not led to the hoped for escalation, resistance forces continue to stage attacks on a daily basis, ambushing military convoys, bombing regime-linked targets and assassinating regime-appointed local officials, suspected informants and others seen as loyal to the ruling junta.”

The call to arm is unprecedented de-bordering in Myanmar and succeeds to gather people across the country to trample the military junta. The narrative of resistance works quite well in uniting the Burmese and ethnic minorities, even when compared to the de-bordering campaign by changing the name of Burma to Myanmar, the ‘rise against junta’ has more narrative power to unite the nation. However, despite the interesting development, de-bordering in Myanmar is still hampered by the lack of democratization and the absence of strong civil society. As presented in Indonesia case, it was democratization and the presence of civil society in the form of freedom of press that make de-bordering of ethnic and religious identity is possible.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the comparison of Re-bordering and De-bordering between Indonesia and Myanmar, this article draws similarities and differences between the two countries. On similarities, three similar conditions contribute to the re-bordering and de-bordering of the two case studies: (1) the nature of ethnic and religious diversity, (2) state formation based on multiethnic composition, (3) the existing narrative of national identity, and (4) struggle with authoritarian regime. Two conditions contribute to differing results of re-bordering and de-bordering of the two case studies: (1) democratization that promotes the narrative of de-bordering, and (2) strong civil society support by freedom of the press. The 1998 reformation in Indonesia plays a significant role in reshaping the country’s national identity—as a Muslim majority and one of the existing biggest democratic country. As for Myanmar, the failure of democratic transitions in the 2000s has trapped the country in the legacy of conflictual re-bordering. The comparison also shows that in order to de-bordering identity, civil society also plays a significant role in promoting the narrative of unity, acceptance, and recognition.

REFERENCES

- Ahnaf, M. I. (2018). Socio-Ethical Origin of Multiculturalism in Indonesia. *Multiculturalism in Asia - Peace and Harmony* (hal. 126-143). College of Religious Studies (CRS): Mahidol University.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities*. London, New York: Verso.

- Arieli, T. (2016). Borders, Conflict and Security. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 27(4), 487-504.
- Chaturvedi, M. (2012). *Myanmar's Ethnic Divide: The Parallel Struggle*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies.
- Crouch, H. (1979). Tatrimonialism and Military Rule in Indonesia. *World Politics*, 31, 571-587.
- Demetriou, O. &. (2018). Introduction: Theorizing Material and Non-Material Mediations on the Borders. Dalam O. &. Demetriou, *The Political Materialities of Borders* (hal. 1-15). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Di Matteo, C. (2024). De-bordering and Re-bordering Practices at the Intersection of Gender and Migration. *Critical Social Policy*, 1–23.
- Dittmer, L. (2008). Burma Vs. Myanmar: What's in a Name? *Asian Survey*, 48(6), 885-888.
- Hamilton, M. (2006). New Imaginings: The Legacy of Benedict Anderson and Alternative Engagements of Nationalism. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 6 (3), 73-89.
- Hoon, C.-Y. (2013). Multicultural Citizenship Education in Indonesia: The Case of a Chinese Christian School. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 44(3).
- İnaç, H. &. (2013). The Construction of National Identity in Modern Times: Theoretical Perspective. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3(11), 223-232.
- International Crisis Group. (2021). *A Legacy of Division*. Crisis Group Asia Report.
- International Crisis Group. (2021). *The Deadly Stalemate in Post-coup Myanmar*. Crisis Group Asia Briefing.
- Kimura, E. (2013). *Political Change and Territoriality in Indonesia: Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Lindsey, T. (2005). "Reconstituting the Ethnic Chinese in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Law, Racial Discrimination and Reform. Dalam T. L. (eds.), *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting* (hal. 57-58). Singapore: ISEAS Publisher.
- Maybury-Lewis, D. (2002). *Indigenous Peoples, Ethnic Groups, and the State*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Nordholt, H. S. (2001). Indonesia, a Nation-State in Search of Identity and Structure. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 157(4), 881-901.
- Nordholt, H. S. (2003). Renegotiating Boundaries: Access, Agency and Identity in Post-Soeharto Indonesia. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 159(4), 550-589.
- Nordholt, H. S. (2011). Indonesia in the 1950s: Nation, Modernity, and the Post-colonial State. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 167(4), 386-404.
- Peletz, M. G. (2024). *Diversity and Unity*. Asia Society.
- Peter, S. (1989). *Boundaries: the Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.
- Pratisti, S. H. (2019b). Festive and Viral: The Islamist and the Leftist in Indonesia's 2019 Election. *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies*, 13(4).

- Pratisti, S. S. (2019a). Narasi Populer Indonesia Pasca Reformasi: Sebuah Kajian Psikokultural. *Umbara*, 4(2).
- Richardson, P. B. (2016). Beyond the Nation and Into the State: Identity, Belonging, and the 'Hyper-border'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 201-215.
- Rogers, R. &. (2020). *The Politics of Social Media Manipulation*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Tilly, C. (2002). *Stories, Identities, and Political Change*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Triandafyllidou, A. (1998). National Identity and the 'Other'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21(4), 593-612.
- Walton, M. J. (2014). *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence*. East-West Center.