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REGIONAL IDENTITY BUILDING WITHOUT LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The case of the ASEAN Community

Ph.D. Dissertation Summary

by

Dang Thi Thu Huong

Dissertation supervisors:

Professor Sebastiano Maffettone

Dr. Raffaele Marchetti

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DISSERTATION SUMMARY

Here and there in the world, states have gathered to build regional communities of countries¹. These communities have changed or have the potential to change their regions' politics, economy and society significantly, not to mention the far-reaching impacts they have made or have the potential to make outside their borders. In Europe, the European Union (EU) describes itself as "a unique economic and political partnership between 27 democratic European countries". With a population the world's largest after China and India, the EU now accounts for approximately a fifth of the global economy and global trade, in addition to its universally recognized political power. It has also reunited a fractured continent. Less than a century after Germany and its allies twice invaded almost the rest of the region, wars have become obsolete and unthinkable within the EU's boundaries, while France and Germany are no longer nemeses. A single currency and a single market where goods, people, money and services can move around freely were created as well. In Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Community (AC) is envisaged to be attained by 2015, having ten countries and a combined population whose size will rival the EU. It is expected to bring permanent peace, a single market and cohesion to a war-torn region.

The emergence, power, influence and potential of these two have made them the research objects of many social sciences, especially political science, law, economics and

¹ By country here I mean a politically organized body of people under a single state, whereas the state, according to Dahl's definition, is "a unique association whose government possesses an extraordinary capacity for obtaining compliance with its rules by (among other means) force, coercion and violence" over a territory (1998: 44).

sociology, etc. In political science, the literature on the EU, both theoretical and empirical, is immense. However, this is not the case about the AC, taking into account that the decision to build it was made only in 2003 and its strategic importance is much less than that of the EU. And in the limited existing scholarship, the empirical component is dominant, whereas the theoretical one is lacking. In addition to the shortage, theoretical works such as those of Emmerson (2005) and Acharya (2009) have been attracted to its security pillar, which is the ASEAN security community (ASC), only.

The same phenomenon exists in the theoretical literature on regional community of countries. While a comprehensive theory of security community of countries was developed by Deutsch et. al (1957), there is no such equivalent for regional community of countries. This dissertation will try to contribute to the theoretical research on the latter² by providing a definition of regional community of countries, reasons for its construction, its components and most importantly, the regional identity of the people in those countries, which I regard as the soul of a regional community of countries.

Why do I call regional identity of the people the soul of a regional community of countries? Because of its cognitive indispensability to the existence of a regional community of countries. It is obvious that there cannot be a collectivity if its participating actors as well as outsiders refuse to recognize they belong to it. In other words, there cannot be a collectivity without a shared identification of participating actors with the

² I want to note that, in this dissertation, I will only discuss regional community of countries whose regional identity of the people are non-existent or insufficient when the grand project of regional community building is launched. Hereafter, when regional community of countries is mentioned, it has the above meaning.

collectivity which is acknowledged by others. This shared identification, in turn, is the defining essence of collective identity, understood in terms of social constructionism. It means a collectivity cannot exist without a collective identity, for example, a regional community of countries cannot exist without a collective identity among countries.

Collective identity among states is generally taken as an elite-centered phenomenon, focusing on “political elites, intellectuals, state officials, and international bureaucrats and civil servants, who were part of or who had immediate access to state power” (Adler & Barnett, 1998: 426), whereas collective identity among countries is the regional identity shared by the people in the countries. While the concept of collective identity among states has been researched in theoretical works of Wendt (1994), Adler & Barnett (1998) and Acharya (2001), as far as I am aware, no similar treatment has been available for the other concept.

On the way to put flesh and bone on the concept of regional identity of the people, I need to examine a host of other concepts, including collective identity, territorial community and, of course, regional community of countries. Definitions, in my understanding, of these concepts will be given, in addition to the reasons for the construction and the components of a regional community of countries. Then I will reach the definition of regional identity of the people in a regional community of countries, as well as the reasons why and how it is built.

Reading the literature on the EU and the AC, I have found another theoretical gap. While the debate about which type of state/regime is the best/better suited to the construction and development of a country has constantly been in the academic spotlight since the 1950s when the idea of regional community was still at an embryonic stage,

there is no similar debate about which type of state/ regime in member countries is best/better suited to the construction of a regional community. Liberal democracy is a prerequisite for EU membership. Many works have been written on democracy and the EU. But no one bothers to ask whether liberal democracy is the best suited, or the better suited to the construction of a regional community than its alternatives, namely illiberal democracy and non-democracy? This dissertation will try to partially answer this question by examining the principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures each type pursues in regional community building and their impacts on the construction of regional identity.

To meet these research objectives, I will deal with the following research questions:

- What is regional identity of the inhabitants in a regional community of countries?

Why the inhabitants develop a regional identity among themselves?

- Among non-democracy, illiberal democracy and liberal democracy, which type of regime is the most/more conducive to regional identity building?

And to answer these questions, I propose the following hypotheses:

- The regional identity whose defining essence is a shared identification of participating actors with the collectivity which is acknowledged by others originates from the expectation and/or belief of the inhabitants that by being a member, their individual needs, especially basic survival needs and shared values are better fulfilled and promoted, and the experience as well as interaction they have when participating in community building.

- Among non-democracy, illiberal democracy and liberal democracy, the last is most suited to the building of a regional identity of the people.
- At most, non-democracy helps build a regional identity of the governing elite and that of the states, not a regional identity of the people.

To test the last hypothesis, I will examine the building of the AC. More than half of its member countries are governed by non-democratic states.

Why the AC?

I choose the AC as a case study for several reasons. First, it provides an important and rich area of investigation to test the last hypothesis. Second, as I mentioned above, the scholarly works on the AC, especially theoretical ones are underdeveloped. The third reason is a personal one. I am Vietnamese. I lived and studied politics in Vietnam and Cambodia. When I pursued my master's in international studies, almost all of my essays and my dissertation were on Malaysia and Indonesia. Hence I am better equipped to write on Southeast Asia than on other regions. The fourth reason is related to the third. But it is not a personal one. LUISS Guido Carli has established and rookied professors, lecturers and visiting professors of the EU. Yet the AC is a faraway myth. I hope my PhD dissertation here will help, to some extent, unveil that myth.

In short, I will try to partially fill three research gaps. The first is the lack of a conceptual framework of regional identity of the people in a regional community of countries. The second is the examination of regional identity building with and without liberal democracy. The third is the inadequacy of the literature on the AC.

This dissertation will be conducted through a qualitative analysis that relies on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are:

- ASEAN, EU and UN official documents such as charters, declarations, treaties, plans of action, statements, speeches, reports and statistics, etc.

- Open letters of CSOs.

The secondary sources mostly consist of:

- Books, chapters and academic articles
- Reports and articles in international and national newspapers
- Keynote addresses, speeches, statements and papers of political leaders and academic experts in Southeast Asia at workshops and seminars.

As I mentioned above, I use social constructionism, which is a sociological theory holding that social phenomena or objects are socially constructed by interactions between the social actor and other related social actors, including its participating social actors, to deal with key concepts of the dissertation. In the meantime, Lockean liberalism heavily influences the way I look at the above-mentioned interactions.

The dissertation is arranged in four chapters. Following the Introduction, which sketches the background, research problem, hypotheses, objectives, methodology and structure of the dissertation in Chapter I, the first part of Chapter II uses social constructionism to examine a host of concepts, including collective identity, region, regional community of countries and finally, regional identity of the people whose defining essence is a shared identification of participating actors with the collectivity which is acknowledged by others. I argue that a regional community of countries is decided to be built when there is be a fundamental, unambiguous and long-term convergence of needs among member states which can not be fulfilled by the states themselves. However, its realization requires the existence of a regional identity among

inhabitants, which originates from the expectation and/or belief of the inhabitants that by being a member, their individual needs, especially basic survival needs and shared values are better fulfilled and promoted, and the experience as well as interaction they have when participating in community building. It means the more in line with the needs of inhabitants the needs of states are and the more positive the interaction and experience they have when taking part in community building, the better it is for the construction of a regional identity.

The second part of Chapter II begins with a theoretical introduction of types of state classified according to their regime (i.e. form of government), namely non-democracy, liberal and liberal democracy. Then I move on to identify significant differences in the treatment by each type of state towards the most common principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures existing at the regional and international levels in contemporary context, such as mutual respect for sovereignty and integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force in interstate relations and peaceful settlement of disputes.

My examination of the principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures a non-democratic state set as indispensable in the regional community in building leads me to conclude that: The participation of their countries in a regional community in building, first and foremost, serves the needs of the non-democratic states. Instead of compromising some of its sovereignty, with the principles of non-interference, respect for sovereignty and consensus, the non-democratic state turns a regional community in building into a sovereignty-enhancing mechanism. The later becomes an effective shield protecting the former against its internal opposition and external interference, and thus

enhances its security/survival and gives it more freedom in terms of domestic affairs. The acceptance in a regional grouping also bestows some external legitimacy, of which the former is always short. In case the needs of the state are generally in line with those of the people, the people who find their country's membership beneficial to them and those they care about, as I argue above, will be more likely to identify themselves with the community in building. And vice versa, when the needs of the states are in conflict with those of the people, the people who find their country's membership do nothing good or even harm to them and those they care about will be more unlikely to identify themselves with it. Then the regional community will actually be the regional community of the states, or the regional community of the governing elites, not that of countries. However, empirically speaking, the performance of most of non-democratic states fails to prove the congruence of their needs and those of the populace.

Besides, controlling and dominating all the access to the agenda-setting and decision-making processes at the regional level, the non-democratic state leaves the ordinary people sidelined. Put it another way, the ordinary people have almost no experience of participating in the agenda-setting and policy-making processes of the regional community in building, be it direct or indirect. The citizens who disagree with the state's policies regarding the community (in building) have no channels to express their opinions and make influence. As a result, the population feels remote and detached from both the affairs of the community in building and the community in building itself. The remoter and more detached they feel, the less they self-identify and are identified by others as part of a regional community in building; or in other words, the less developed the regional identity is.

Meanwhile, my examination of the principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures a liberal democratic state advocates in building a regional community leads me to conclude that: Compared to their non-democratic counterparts, liberal democratic states see sovereignty in a much weaker light. As a result, they are more flexible about building or joining supranational communities, which is the most integrated kind of its sort in contemporary context.

In a liberal democratic state, governments and MPs count on the votes of the citizens for their political survival. Politicians only say Yes to the membership which clearly touches on national and to varying degrees, individual interests when they know that their constituency gives their blessing and expects it to be beneficial to them and those they care about. Later, the people also have the power over other important issues of the community in building. The process of community building is not out of their control. They are part of it. Therefore, they tend to self-identify and be identified by others with the community.

Not only the people, or a majority of them are the ones who give the final say in important issues of the community in building, not to mention the opinions of the minority are, at least, voiced, but the people also have the opportunities and experiences of setting the agenda and making the decisions on the most important issues in the community in building, be it directly in referenda or indirectly via the operations of governments and regional civil society. The opportunities and experiences make them feel attached to the community in building and its affairs. The more attached they are, the more they self-identify and are identified by others as part of a regional community in building; or in other words, the more developed the regional identity is.

When all the members of a regional community in building are liberal democratic countries, shared liberal democratic characteristics are conducive to regional identity building and supranational community building. Shared liberal democratic culture means shared values and safety. Meanwhile, market-capitalist economies and unconstrained communication promote economic interests and interaction.

The last type of state - illiberal democracy - is the most difficult to deal with as it is the ambivalent one. Being the half-sister of both liberal democracy and non democracy, it is democratic and more democratic than the latter, but illiberal and less liberal than the former. In terms of the principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty, it is less strict than the latter but less flexible than the former. In terms of consensus vs. majority voting, I argue that it tends to go with the flow. If its liberal democratic sister is more powerful and influential, it chooses majority voting in issues that do not touch on important national interests. If its other sister has greater leverage, it follows her suit. When illiberal democratic states flock together, the decision is made case by case.

In conclusion, among non-democracy, illiberal democracy and liberal democracy, the last is most suited to the building of a regional identity of the people. Meanwhile, at most, non democracy helps build a regional identity of the governing elite and that of the states, not a regional identity of the people which is, however, facilitated by liberal democracy.

Chapter III is a case study of regional community building without liberal democracy. It examines the AC, which consists of 10 countries that are governed by illiberal democratic and non-democratic states. The first subchapter is on Southeast Asian

regionalism up to 2003 when the grand project of the AC was announced. It first introduces the emergence of the region of Southeast Asia in history as well as its coherence and diversity. The next discusses the endogenous and exogenous reasons for the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Then a brief history of ASEAN is given prior to a critical analysis of the correlation between regionalism and non-democracy in Southeast Asia. It is followed by a section on the AC, which includes the reasons for the formation of the AC and the AC building. A case study of the engagement between civil society and ASEAN in the AC building process will serve as the catalyst for the analysis of regional identity building without liberal democracy in Southeast Asia. I argue that if ASEAN wants to establish a real community, it must change its modus operandi. It must be much more than an exclusive club for the governing elite by giving more space as well as power to the people.

Last but not least, Chapter V: Conclusion and Outlook will check the compatibility between the findings of regional identity building in the AC and the findings of regional identity building without liberal democracy in Chapter II. It will also try to predict the future of regional identity building and regional community building in Southeast Asia.

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