

BOOK REVIEW

Multiculturalism in Asia: Peace and Harmony, edited by Imtiyaz Yusuf. Mahidol University & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018, 166 pp.

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This book that was edited by Imtiyaz Yusuf comes at a crucial time to forward the narrative that all major religions and cultures, especially in Asia, recognise the religious and cultural diversity within communities in pursuance of peaceful co-existence. Imtiyaz Yusuf provocatively states at the beginning of the book that the recent global rise in conflict, xenophobia and ethno-religious exclusivism in many regions including Southeast Asia is a growing concern for the survival of the multicultural world. This book offers significant insights into multiculturalism in the Asian context, primarily from the perspective of religion (Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity), politics, sociology, anthropology, and also economics by incorporating the epitome of the challenges, the conflicts and the successes of implementing policies of multiculturalism in Asian countries.

The discourse on multiculturalism in Asia revolves around how post-colonial countries build their identities – whether in the context of language, religion or ethnicity – where dominant groups assert their interest at the expense of marginalisation of the minority groups. The book elaborates on the multitude of evidence that shows the tyranny of the majority which has strong sociopolitical and economic advantages, and how this, directly and indirectly, marginalises the minorities while pursuing their exclusive interests and rights.

Imtiyaz Yusuf begins the book by giving a lucid debate on multiculturalism in European and Asian contexts, which connects to the whole discussion in the following chapters. Given that the context of multiculturalism in Asia is slightly different than that in post-war Europe, one of the most important arguments in the book highlights how diverse societies in this region have been living together

peacefully from past to present. Surin Pitsuwan, who has strong Islamic credentials, weaves his immense religious learning and interfaith engagement (Islam, Christian and Buddhism) with arguments for multiculturalism throughout his keynote address, in which he states that there is a transcendental unity in the commonality of all religions. The eloquent prose continues with Suriya Ratanakul who chronicled Thai Royal benevolence to the ethnic-religious minorities, particularly the hill tribe communities in the north and the Malay Muslims in the south. The late His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Queen Sirikit and the Royal family, based on the spirit of tolerance that resonates from Buddhism, showered compassion upon those communities by introducing a plan of rural development as part of the measure to reduce poverty and to ensure those minority communities live in harmony with the Thai majority. The following chapter is written by Mahinda Deegalle who elucidates the historical and contemporary narratives of long-standing religious traditions in a shared spiritual space, Adam's Peak, and the participation of Sufi Muslims in the pilgrimage that enriched multifaith interactions, tolerance and spiritual experiences by way of hospitality and ritual.

Next, Rizal Buendia unravels the challenges faced by ASEAN member states with the multiculturalism issue in relation to economic cooperation. His chapter resolutely advocates economic cooperation, inclusive multicultural economic development and democracy as significant measures in mitigating conflict and managing diversity in this pluralistic region. The subsequent chapters on Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines manifests the prime challenges on the reality of multiculturalism in these respective countries. Osman Bakar focuses on the Malaysian perspective and its recent history on multiculturalism, where he posits his arguments based on the Islamic philosophical framework that recognises diversity. Notably, Osman Bakar argues that even though diversity is divinely expressed in the Quran, the Malay-Muslims as a majority group have displayed polarised attitudes and stances towards multiculturalism, pluralism and human rights discourse that impacts interethnic and interreligious relations. In the following chapter, Arnold Monera explains the multicultural challenges in the Philippines, a country that claims to be multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious, but due to the problem of governance, its minority Indigenous People and Muslims have faced a long history of marginalisation.

In a similar vein, Indonesia's diverse nature was explored by Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf, sharing the country's rich experience in managing diversity in the past to the present. Interestingly, the author portrays religious tolerance and interfaith interaction in religious festivities amongst local people such as during the Quranic recitation competition and Easter festival. This point leads to the last chapter by Sabir Naz who recounts surviving several vibrant and many-hued Hindu festivals in Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim country, which to some extent debunks the claim that Pakistani Muslims are intolerant.

The main premise that is brought forward in this book is that Asian countries present a workable model of leadership to ensure that multiculturalism within its communities does not vanish. Leaders, whether kings, politicians or governments have to play a major role in leading the diverse communities to be more inclusive to other groups, combating hatred and misunderstanding to guarantee a peaceful life, an example of which was done by the late Thai King, Kandyen King Senarat and the Pakistani government (as mentioned in the chapters written by Suriya Ratanakul, Mahinda Deegalle and Sabir Naz). If the governmental initiative fails to advance the quality of life and to integrate vulnerable and minority communities into mainstream society, as Arnold Moner argues, conflict and misunderstanding will remain and be potentially damaging to the socioeconomic development of the country. As top leadership alone is not sufficient to uphold multiculturalism, the lower rung of society is no less essential than the state level in supporting and defending multiculturalism based on local wisdom, as Ahnaf contends in his chapter. In a similar tone, Osman Bakar emphasises that the interreligious peaceful lives of Malaysians are mainly contributed by society.

The strength of this book can be traced to how it connects three main ideas, which are the historical accounts on multiculturalism from different contexts, the religious and cultural perspectives of it, and successful stories of contemporary approaches and policies that strongly support and defend multiculturalism, despite many incidents of terrorism, religious intolerance, and persecution of minority groups that has happened in this region. As argued by Surin Pitsuwan in his keynote address in the book, anything that happens in the Asian region, whether war or religious conflict, will have further repercussions and implications on the global community. Hence, the narratives and arguments put forward in this book are meant to rejuvenate the multiculturalism discourse by presenting the Asian perspective.

The book also delineates two different attitudes of the Muslim communities in various countries towards diversity and multiculturalism; two polar opposites that support and oppose the notions. With historical anecdotes and current observations, Mahinda Deegalle explains how the Muslim community can tolerate and assimilate with the interfaith tradition of pilgrimage to Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka, and Sabir Naz also notes how Hindu festivals can be celebrated in Muslim countries such as Pakistan. The two chapters are meant to counter the narratives and attitude of intolerance among Muslims which prohibit non-Islamic religious rituals and festival participation and limit interaction with people of other faiths. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf and Osman Bakar depict a segment of Muslim groups' intolerance towards people of other faith and intra-faith communities. Initially, Osman Bakar argues that the Malay-Muslim community is more tolerant towards cultural pluralism based on the teachings of Islam, as they were willing to grant citizenship to Chinese and Indian immigrants

in a social contract as part of the deal in gaining independence from Britain. This ignores the fact that Muslim minority communities in many parts of the world have benefited from strong multiculturalism policies and high societal religious tolerance that enable them to secure their religious rights and identity. This selective approach towards multiculturalism is problematic and against the nature of God's creation of humankind and the explicit Quranic injunction.

The book could, however, be much better if the two aspects can be further expounded. Firstly, given that in most Muslim countries, the opposition and criticism towards religious and cultural pluralism comes from some of the Muslim groups as discussed by Osman Bakar and Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf, the writings in this book should include authoritative interpretations of the traditional Islamic scholars, including those of the Asian ulama, to support the argument that Islam champions religious and cultural diversity. Quoting Quranic verses and historical anecdotes such as Ibn Battuta's and Sulaiman's travelogues or citing the inclusive participation in non-Islamic religious traditions in some parts of Muslim countries (as written by Osman Bakar, Mahinda Deegalle and Sabir Naz) to propagate religious tolerance and accepting multiculturalism would not persuade those groups to accept the idea that Islam espouses peaceful co-existence with people of other faiths. The interpretation of medieval Islamic scholars is still relevant in the minds of many traditionalist Muslims (and more so to Islamist and extremist groups), especially in countries where conservatism is fast-growing. The ulama's authority is still referred to in the discourse of *Fiqh Aqalliyat* (Islamic jurisprudence on Muslim minorities) and interaction with people of other faiths in contemporary times. Secondly, even though the book is heavily concerned with local and regional policy, the discussion ignores multiculturalism from legal perspectives of Asian countries. How the law manages religious and cultural diversity and to what extent the existing laws would have an impact on a pluralistic society are vital questions to explore. It is also important to analyse the commitment of the states' legislative bodies to enact legal provisions to curb racism, discriminatory practices and prejudice against minority groups.

In conclusion, this book renders multiple responses to multiculturalism in Asia and most of the authors' arguments are deliberately derived from liberal multiculturalists and religious accommodationists that support interfaith coexistence. For a peaceful Asia and a better future, its pluralistic nature should be preserved by laws, policies and measures that together act as a buttress to multiculturalism, led by compassionate leadership and people.