BOOK REVIEW

KAROLINA PRASAD, *IDENTITY POLITICS AND ELECTIONS IN MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA: ETHNIC ENGINEERING IN BORNEO.*
ABINGDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2016. 215PP. ISBN: 978-1-138-85473-4 (HBK)

Reviewed by
Chong Wu Ling
Department of Southeast Asian Studies
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Malaya
(chong.wu.ling@um.edu.my)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.22452/brj.vol11no1.9

Karolina Prasad's book is a welcoming addition to the literature on ethnic politics in Malaysia and Indonesia, particularly in Sarawak (Malaysia) and West Kalimantan (Indonesia). To the reviewer's knowledge, this is a first scholarly work that compares extensively the ethnic politics in Sarawak and West Kalimantan, two states on Borneo with the same ethnic composition but under different regimes and electoral institutions. Malaysia is a consociational polity where power is shared through the bargains among the elites of various ethnic categories. Malaysia also adopts a first-past-the-post electoral system with single-mandate constituencies. While legislators at the national and state levels in Malaysia are directly elected, executive heads at the national, regional and local levels are indirectly elected. Indonesia, on the other hand, is a centripetal polity that does not include elite bargains but instead let the voters decide the ethnic composition of the legislative and executive. Indonesia also adopts a proportional representation electoral system with multi-mandate constituencies. Legislators at the national, provincial and local levels are directly elected. Moreover, presidents and vice-presidents are directly elected since 2004, and executive heads at the regional and local levels are directly elected since 2005. While West Kalimantan has encountered several inter-ethnic

conflicts, including the deadly violence of 1999, 2000 and 2001 between Dayaks and Madurese as well as between Malays and Madurese, Sarawak has remained peaceful since it became part of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. This study aims to find out under different political settings in divided societies, how political entrepreneurs use ethnic identities as tools to expand their support base or to maximise their chances of victory in elections. In other words, this book is about how politics influence ethnic identities in societies where ethnic identities are activated in politics.

It is worth noting that this book includes religious identity as part of ethnic identities because the majority of the population within certain ethnic categories in both states believe in particular religions, e.g., the Malays in both Sarawak and West Kalimantan are mostly Muslims, and the Dayaks in West Kalimantan are mostly Christians.

The research methods used in this study are archival research, individual interviews with certain political leaders in Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as data analysis. For West Kalimantan's case, Prasad conducted extensive analyses on the results of recent legislative elections, presidential elections, gubernatorial elections and local executive head elections in certain localities according to religious proportions.

Prasad's research findings show a few astonishing phenomena. First, in Sarawak, fewer directly electable offices does not result in the activation of fewer ethnic identities as hypothesized. Instead, various ethnic identities that include ethnic backgrounds, religious backgrounds, linguistic backgrounds and regional origins are activated through parties and executive nominations. Second, in West Kalimantan, free ethnic competition devoid of power-sharing schemes does not necessarily induce frequent activation of different ethnic identities and enable shifts between them as hypothesized. Instead, most of the elections on three tiers of administration saw only the traditional Muslim versus non-Muslim and the Malay versus Dayak division in the province without involving other kinds of ethnic identities. Third, although the electoral institutions in West Kalimantan defuse ethnic mobilization and include no power-sharing bargains among ethnic elites, on several occasions political entrepreneurs with different ethnic backgrounds engaged in informal negotiations and settlements that were similar to power-sharing. For instance, most local executive heads shared power with their deputies "of an ethnic category that would otherwise be considered a political enemy to their own ethnic category" (p. 196). This indicates "a tacit understanding that spoils are better shared" (p. 196). Prasad rightly points out that this is due to the long and recent history of violent inter-ethnic conflicts in the province. Hence, political

entrepreneurs tend to adopt political arrangements that "guarantee each relevant segment of the society participation in power" (p. 205).

Based on her research findings, Prasad suggests that political institutions that combine both consociationalism and centripetal approaches are more suitable for divided societies, especially those that have recently experienced violent ethnic conflict. In order to minimise further violence, Prasad also recommends certain measures that discourage the manipulation of ethnic identities in electoral politics, e.g., a ban on ethnic parties, or the introduction of "constituency boundaries that dissect ethnic regions" (p. 206). These are practical recommendations, and they would certainly reduce ethnic manipulation in electoral politics if they are adopted.

However, it is unfortunate that in contrast to most other similar works, this book places its references at the end of each chapter instead of at the end of the book. This might cause some inconvenience to readers in referring to this book. Nevertheless, *Identity Politics and Elections in Malaysia and Indonesia: Ethnic Engineering in Borneo* is still an essential contribution to the studies of ethnic politics in Malaysia and Indonesia. It offers a useful approach to understanding the role of political institutions in shaping the modes and dynamics of ethnic manipulation in electoral politics. Hence, it would be of benefit to those with interest in this area of study.